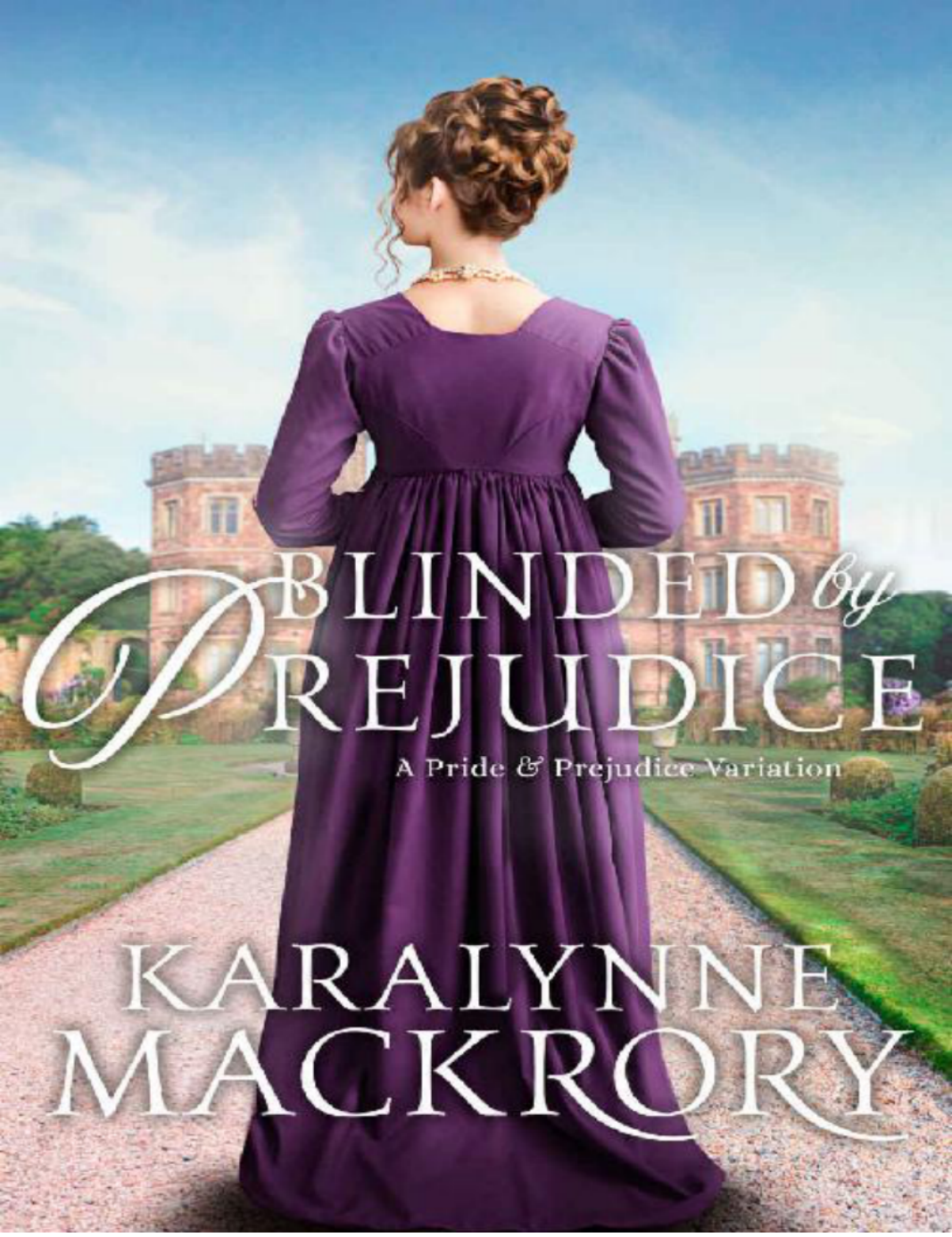

BLINDED by PREJUDICE
A Pride & Prejudice Variation
KARALYNNE MACKRORY

Blinded by Prejudice

KaraLynne Mackrory



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To Andy

It is thyself, mine own self's better part; Mine eye's clear eye, my dear heart's dearer heart; My food, my fortune, and my sweet hope's aim, My sole earth's heaven; and my heaven's claim

William Shakespeare

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Chapter One



I woke with a gasp, my chest burning for air. Air that was denied to me. Tentatively, my tongue edged out to slake the dust that coated my lips, chapped and bruised as they felt. The small effort was too much for the exhaustion pressing down on every part of my body, and my eyes fell closed again. It was useless to try to see anything anyway, for it was black as pitch whether my eyes were open or not. The relief of closing them, though, of succumbing to the sleep that beckoned me down to my bones, was nearly impossible to ignore. My mouth felt gritty with an earthy taste of moss and soil, yet I was too weary to care.

I was both hot and cold in an awful state of perpetual pain. The hard stone pressing, cutting into my back was cold and unyielding. I could not decide whether the freezing stone was a blessing or a curse. Its frostiness pushed into me like a tide, at times easing the agony I felt with a wave of numbness that saved me for a few moments from the biting, searing pain that raked through every inch of my body, but ever waiting for the numbing tide to recede.

At first I did not know the source of the heat. Other than to know that the heat was the reason I could not draw breath, its source did not press for space in my consciousness. Caught between the cold and the heat, I felt constrained between the two in a battle for dominance. The heat brought with it an oppression against my breast like nothing I had ever before felt, allowing only the slightest of breaths imaginable, each precious pull of air not enough, never enough.

I felt the seductive pull of sleep grasp me again, and I went willingly this time.



Dirt from above fell on my face and brought me back to consciousness for a second time. Or was it the third? It was difficult to keep track when my mind felt buried in sludge.

The ground shifted slightly, moaning in a way I wished I could. Low rumbles of grinding, flexing earth—and then silence. I never

knew until then that such a silence could exist. As if every sound was forbidden and sucked into the darkness surrounding me.

This time my mind was more able to hold the edges of my awareness into a whole to evaluate what had happened. Like whispers of a breeze against my skin, I recalled parts of a picture now coming to my memory. After days of incessant rain, the skies had cleared enough to venture out, and a pleasure trip to Bodden Chapel ruins was proposed. For several hours, the skies remained dry, but soon a gentle rain began again.

If I had been alone, I would not have minded the rain so very much. It was perhaps not proper for a lady to enjoy a cleansing drizzle, but I had been known to stand among the trees on many a walk, facing up to the sky to catch the cool mist of rain upon my features. Suddenly, the fire in my throat raged to a conflagration. My tongue was thick in my mouth, and the want to taste a bit of rain to slake my thirst was a most primal impulse.

A choked sob escaped me, followed quickly by a shuddering breath, shallow and mocking the scream from my lungs for air.

I forced myself to thin my breaths, to relegate my heart into subsisting on the little my lungs could draw in once again. Calm. It was necessary if I wished for the edges of my mind to hold fast and not suck me back down into the depths of senselessness. And I did wish for wakefulness—despite the awareness of my injuries that came with it—for the rest of the day was forming in my memory.

Before the trembling began, we six had just stopped to seek a meagre shelter from the ruin walls. It would do little to truly keep us dry, especially as the drizzle turned quickly into a downpour. Yet there we stood against the uneven blocks to wait out the rain.

I had felt it silly to take cover when we were not but a walk down the hill—perhaps five hundred feet or less—from the carriages. The ruins were placed halfway up an incline of some significance for our usually lazy Hertfordshire hills, which was why they were an object of interest to visit. The old chapel ruins were tucked into the side of the slope, earth and bracken having long ago begun to swallow up the remaining walls as if the earth was determined to erase the unjust touch of man on its contours. Now it truly had swallowed us up.

Subduing the panic of such a thought, I revisited the moments I could recall. I had felt it was better to risk a little wetting to get to a more permanent shelter, for Jane's sake at the very least. If Jane had not been among the party, I might not have minded seeking the temporary shelter to wait out the rain, but I had her comfort to consider, and I suggested going to the carriages while the weather was still mild. She had only recently recovered from a soaking that had forced her to bed with a fever for the better part of a week at

Netherfield. I ought to have objected to keeping Jane in the rain, impertinent though it was to contradict a certain clergyman's demand that we remain. Oh, how I wished now that I had. Instead, I conceded to the negligible shelter of the wall while watching the drizzle turn to a downpour.

Jane! The thought of her and where she might be pushed away the ever-present seduction of sleep. I discovered to my relief that, with effort, I could free an arm from where it had been trapped at my side. Though the energy it took to do such a nominal task left my head feeling light again, and had I been able to see anything in the dark, I was sure that my sight would have wavered. How long had I been thus trapped?

Once I recovered my wits, I practised the simple movement of my fingers, feeling thousands of currents of pain shooting along the length of my arm as my blood once again found its way into it. Finally, with a bend at the elbow, I prepared myself for the impossible task of moving the great burden weighing upon me, stealing my breath and trapping me against the cold of the rocks. When my hand encountered the supple leather of a greatcoat, I froze—the final moments rushed back into my memory and stunned my fevered mind.

Mr Darcy had been walking with Miss Bingley, Mr Collins paired with me, and the only satisfied grouping among us, Jane with Mr Bingley, walked ahead. It was with this unhappy party that I was spending the afternoon, waiting against the ruined wall for the rain to subside. At one point, Mr Collins, whose conversation was as steady as the incessant rain, blessedly stepped away from our party, ostensibly to inspect some bushes some thirty paces off. I shuddered to contemplate his business in the shrubbery; nevertheless I was pleased to have him leave my side. It was not long after he had begun his return walk to us that the trembling began. The earth moaned a low, ghastly sound.

Mr Darcy looked about as if to explain it. We all did, yet nothing appeared to provide clarity. Mr Collins was seemingly insensible, still trudging his way back up the hill to us with laboured breaths. Mr Bingley held my sister's arm close to his side and looked to his friend for guidance.

"Darcy…"

I still remember the odd way Mr Darcy looked up, then at the chapel ruins wall, his focused eyes travelling beyond it, up the steep incline of the earth behind. The stern line of his brow showed the rapidity of his thoughts. I did not know why, but I could not tear my eyes off Mr Darcy as he surveyed our locality. The rest happened so quickly—it could not have been more than mere seconds—that the memory of it forced me to shut my eyes tightly as if I could erase the

recollection assaulting me now.

I knew. I knew in my heart that something awful was happening. When lead settles into your stomach while your heart ascends to choke you, you know. Instead of searching out what it was that Mr Darcy focused on so gravely above our heads, I could do nothing but watch him. His face halted in horror, and then his eyes locked with mine. I saw his mouth open to shout, but the rushing in my ears prevented me from hearing what instruction left his lips as he forcefully pushed a startled Miss Bingley some distance into my cousin's arms and leapt at me with the coiled grace of a lion. The rest had been blackness and noise and pain.

Oh, good God!

My hands, still pressed against dirt-covered leather, turned to ice as I realised the weight that pressed upon me, the source of the warmth seeping into me, was none other than Mr Darcy. And he was dead.

Chapter Two



"Help." The word was barely a prayer on my lips. I repeated it, trying to draw breath to give it some power. Still, it was but a whisper, and not entirely due to Mr Darcy's body upon my chest. My panic prevented me from uttering with more conviction.

I began a fevered repetition of the word, still a nearly silent plea on my lips, over and over again. "Help, help, help!"

I pushed against Mr Darcy's shoulder—all solid muscle and inert mass—and to my relief, he shifted the slightest bit. This small movement caused soil and debris to fall upon me, choking any satisfaction I might have gained by being able to draw in deeper and just a fraction easier. A large stone rolled off the back of the gentleman's neck onto my hand and then landed with a dull thud upon the ground beside me. I wondered briefly whether this was the stone that dealt the killing blow. Shivers ran through me.

With hope surging through me from my nominal success, I mustered all my strength and pressed again on Mr Darcy's shoulder while I tried to extract myself from under his body. My entire frame screamed with the effort, bruised muscles protesting the exertion. The space was too limited for me to take much triumph from my efforts, but eventually, I was able to push Mr Darcy onto his side; my battered lungs cried at the release of the weight upon them. My eyes filled with tears as a roaring agony gripped my chest. The restriction of the gentleman's weight being removed was no blessing at first. I still felt as though I could not truly breathe, for every movement wracked my body with shards of pain. I nearly lost consciousness from it all despite the freedom from Mr Darcy's weight.

For several minutes, I lay there trying to regulate my heart and slow my breathing, for while I could now breathe deeply, the irony was that it hurt too much to do so. In the quiet, I heard a sound I had not expected that both terrified and thrilled me. A low moan escaped Mr Darcy's lips, and I froze, wondering whether it had been imagined. Oh mercy! Could he be alive?

"Mr Darcy, sir?" My voice cracked due to my parched throat; it was barely audible even to my own ears.

Tentatively, I reached out a hand to that same shoulder. I could

not see it, yet I knew about where it ought to be. There was only so much space, and I was still virtually pressed against his side. Trembles danced down my body, for despite the circumstances, I was not accustomed to touching a gentleman outside the social graces in dances.

I made contact with Mr Darcy, but it was his chest I encountered. I drew my hand back immediately—the feel of it put me to blush—and raised it sufficiently to reach his shoulders. With effort, I gently shook his shoulder while calling his name again.

Mr Darcy groaned in response, and I was relieved as I felt him begin to shift on his own. His efforts were clumsy, and each movement caused him to brush against me, for we were in almost a coffin of sorts. There was no space for one comfortably, let alone two. His accidental contact was too much for me, and I knew I must still his movements.

"Mr Darcy, sir, please…," I began to plead, trying to put some distance between us.

I could hear him collapse into stillness once again, but this time I could tell he was drifting into unconsciousness. I knew I must say something, but before I could compose the words, I heard his hoarse voice.

"Miss Elizabeth…are you…have you…hurt?"

Mr Darcy, speaking into the abyss, wrapped around me like a too-warm blanket, and I could tell my cheeks heated. It was startling how intimate it felt to see nothing but hear his voice near my ear. His mumbling indicated he was not entirely lucid.

He would have taken the brunt of the collapse.

"I am well, sir. And you? Are you very injured?'

Mr Darcy once again moved such that I felt his arm brush past mine as he inspected his person. The protest clawed up my throat and died there; our position robbed me of coherent thought and permeated me with maidenly awareness.

"My head. I believe I have sustained…a blow."

"Is it bleeding, sir?"

No enticing voice returned my query, though my companion groaned in the affirmative, the vibrations penetrating my bones. Mr Darcy was battling the same seductive call for sleep that I had earlier.

I retrieved my handkerchief from my pocket. I knew from experience that head wounds could bleed dreadfully. I had had my share of falls from trees when I was younger.

Tentatively, my hand ventured between us, "Here, sir. You must press this against the wound to stop the bleeding."

I felt his hand clumsily connect with mine to receive the cloth, but then our hands were pressed into the ground between us, his a dead

weight upon mine as Mr Darcy lost his fight with consciousness. I pulled my hand out from under his and quaveringly tried to wake him once again.

Oh, for goodness' sake! Feeling ill-humoured yet unequal to the impropriety of the situation, I knew I must endeavour to discover Mr Darcy's wound myself and press on it. With careful movements, I tried to sit up and was pleased to find that I could just barely fit in the space if I tightly tucked my knees against my chest, my head against them. Still, the top of our tomb was low and the space notably tight. My faltering hands reached towards where Mr Darcy was, and I cursed the blackness that prevented my movements from being sure and precise. I wished to touch very little of him, but I knew that without being able to see him, I would have to fumble until I could discern where on his person I was touching.

"I apologise, sir, for I must touch you," I whispered aloud even though I knew he could not hear me. "I am going to try to…I do not mean to…"

My throat closed on me as my hands encountered the warmth of his neck. They stilled upon the skin there, shocked at the feeling. My mind was blanketed with sensation. I could think only about the fact that I had never once touched a gentleman's neck and the skin there felt impossibly soft. My hands lingered there long enough that it was the detection of his slow pulse that woke me to my task, and with careful movement, my hands journeyed blindly up Mr Darcy's head.

Rough stubble tickled my fingertips, then the rigid strength of his jaw. I withdrew slightly, swallowing thickly. The dryness in my throat felt unbearable. I was forced to lean closer to reach his injury, but before I did, I tried to draw breath again. Feathery hair caressed my fingers, thick and curling around them. It was velvety despite the grit I felt on his scalp from the soil that had fallen on us both. Tentatively, I allowed my hands to explore upward, the hair parting for my fingers as they brushed through it.

Mr Darcy moaned faintly and my hands retracted sharply. My heart bolted in my chest, and I felt all the shame of a naughty child caught by nanny. I shook my head slightly, dispelling the silliness of the notion with vigour when I heard no more from Mr Darcy. He was injured, and I was merely attempting to help. Nothing of which to be ashamed.

Anticipation coiled in a spring under my breast. It demanded my breath to still. I was further disgruntled to find that contact with the luxurious curls brought a pleasure I did not want to acknowledge. Focusing my ridiculous thoughts on the task, I carefully brushed my fingers through his hair until, reaching to the back of his head, I encountered his wound. It did not surprise me that it felt severe, yet

panic surged inside me like an animal barely restrained. I may not have had many charitable thoughts towards the gentleman in general, but I did not wish for him to suffer, or worse, die. The vision of his lowered brow, stern and focused eyes boring into me, before he leapt to protect me from the falling ruin wall came to my mind. This man saved my life!

Dread seeped into the walls of our space, scenting the air so that I choked on it. It threatened to consume me. Driven by it, I placed the handkerchief against the injury. The pressure caused Mr Darcy to groan again in muffled pain while still insensate. When he did not waken, I allowed myself to draw breath. The position I had to hold to keep the cloth against the wound brought me close to him, and it was disconcerting in new ways.

I do not know how long I sat there in the silence with Mr Darcy. I felt the cold creep deeper into me, as he was no longer lying atop of me and I had lost the direct benefit from his heat. I could feel a little of its temptation, though. Enough to always be aware of our proximity.

It must have been an hour or more before I realised I must try to call out for help again. We could not be the only ones. Surely, the others were about. The sucking pain about my chest prevented me from speaking above a whisper; it shot through my side every time I tried. It was the same spasm that nearly caused me to lose the battle with unconsciousness to which my companion had succumbed. But a whisper would not do.

“Help! Is anyone about?” My voice, while hoarse, was at least audible.

My ears were tuned for any sound. I tried again, despite the shards of pain, to call louder for help. It seemed at first that my cries would go unanswered, but then there was the muffled sound of someone’s boots scraping against a pebbled path. The crunching sound was faint but left my heart pounding out of my breast. Again, I uttered my plea, forcing my bruised and battered ribs to expel the sound with more power.

“Help!”

“Hallo? Miss?’

The voice was distant, sounding much too far away for real comfort, but it was sweet musical nectar. Tears leaked out of my eyes and I felt them wet a path down my dusty cheeks. My breath came in shaking gasps as I tried to control my immediate reaction to hearing another’s voice in this murky void.

“Yes! Please help me!” I do not know how articulate I was through my tears, but the distant voice replied, sending my heart pumping strength through my limbs. *We are saved!*

“Miss…I cannot tell where ye are. ‘elp is comin’. Ne’er ye fear.”

I opened my mouth to give my location, but our space was still pitch black and I could not help him either.

“Mr Bingley, ‘e went to fetch ‘elp, Miss.”

“Jane…Miss Bennet?” I could not help but ask, though I dreaded any news he might give.

“Oh, yer sister went with ‘im, ma’am. Name’s John, Mr. Bingley’s groom. ‘e left me to wait for the ‘elp to arrive, Miss.”

I expelled a breath I had not known I was holding with the news. Jane was all right; she was safe and not locked in this dark nightmare too.

“Mighty glad I is to ‘ear you, miss. Mighty glad.” There was a pause and his voice was more tentative. “And the gen’leman?”

I looked down towards where Mr Darcy was, although I could not see him. “Mr Darcy is with me, but he is injured.”

Relief was evident in the groom’s voice as he replied, “It cannot be long now, miss. They left hours ago. Though I ‘magine the roads won’t be too good fer all the rain.”

The oppression of the blackness made me speak up again despite every word slicing through my ribs in the effort to speak loud enough to be heard.

“Can you give me the time, sir?”

“Oh, I guess it might be about ten night, miss.”

Ten. His answer made little sense, and my mind, feeling the boggy weight of exhaustion pressuring me to close my eyes and succumb to sleep, could not seem to process the impossibility of it all. We had set out for our country ride near half two in the afternoon. We arrived at Bodden Chapel ruins close to an hour later and could not have been touring them long before the drizzle began. Mr Collins had insisted we wait a bit longer. One might suppose that Mr Collins, possessing the same profession for which the old chapel was built, must have felt that it lent him some consequence in his mind, and it was incumbent upon him to enlighten us as to all things spiritual. His obnoxious chatter robbed the fascination of the ruins from everyone around him.

I remembered the angered shame I felt at the suppressed titters of Miss Bingley on Mr Darcy’s arm, and the disapproving scowl on that man’s face every time my cousin pressed his clammy palm to my elbow to point out another prospect and lead me in that direction.

I still did not know what had caused the trembling we felt in the earth, or in what, exactly, I was entombed with Mr Darcy, but I now assumed that the ruin wall had fallen around us. Perhaps the entire slope had too. How long were we both knocked senseless under the rubble? The darkness surrounding me now made me wonder whether it was a lack of opening to the outside world or the natural blackness

of the night that blinded us. Ten.

I could hear and speak with John if we both spoke loudly. His distance now made sense if we were speaking through small gaps in the rocks and sodden earth.

Choked sobs wracked my chest, sending shards of pain across my sides. I knew I must steady my breath, but I could not stay the panic seizing me. Hours I had been trapped, hours more, I likely would be. The walls around began to press into me. A part of my mind knew that they were not really moving again, but it felt as if they were. My breath was being stolen from me. I tried to draw in the air, but in our small space, it felt as if it was running out. On my upper lip, I could feel perspiration that foretold the coming of a swoon, the hot clamminess around my lips and neck growing more poignant. I fought it long enough to almost lay flat again before I felt my head fall against the firm warmth of Mr Darcy's chest, the inky darkness in my mind taking over.

Chapter Three



Morpheus was losing his hold on me gradually. I drew closer to Jane in an attempt to stay the hand of wakefulness. I felt my body yearn desperately for more sleep, but I was waking gradually because my dearest sister had once again stolen the bedcovers, as she was wont to do. My limbs and back still felt the pleasurable flowing listlessness that comes with deep sleep, and I wanted to hold on to that. Arms heavy with exhaustion, I reached for Jane to pull her closer even as I mumbled to her to share the blankets.

She chuckled low and rumbling near my ear, and I settled in again to the agreeable warmth of our shared space. I felt the weight of the blankets as she placed them about me once more. My mind barely registered her usual lavender toilette water having a more subtle lemon and sandalwood fragrance. I found it pleasing, but that was the last coherent thought to pass through me before sleep captured me again.

When next my mind began to work its way out of the safety of sleep, I allowed it to transpire. The ropes of our bed needed adjusting again, and I needed to ask Hill to add more straw, for our mattress had become quite hard. My hips and shoulders protested in mighty stiffness as I tried to adjust my position to alleviate their sting.

Gradually the outline of the dream I had experienced came begging to my consciousness, and I shuddered involuntarily. What a nightmare it had been. The cold rocks, wet stone and earth, not to mention the company, all caused my mind to rebel against the thought of it. My hands were rested upon the flat warmth of Jane, and I rubbed her back to reassure myself that I was once again safe and out of the horrid grasp of the dream.

My hand slowed its up and down motion as if time, too, was slowing. I was feeling not the curve of her spine nor the fine cotton of her nightgown, but silk brocade with the occasional button. I continued a slow progression up and down Jane's back, compelled, mesmerised, and in disbelief, trying to tell my mind I was imagining these strange textures. Instead, as I felt along the curvatures of the surface, strong sinewy muscle bowed and flexed under my palm. My mind grew more alert with each caress.

From there, time sped, or the sanity of my mind reasserted itself, for I was wide awake. My hand stilled and recoiled back into my chest as I rolled away in horror. It was still pitch black, and I was grateful for it, for my heart was choking me and my fevered expression would have added to the many mortifications I felt as I realised, with the utmost of shock, that none of it had been a dream. This was not…was *not*…safe and warm Jane. This was Mr Darcy!

I bit my lip in terror, the humours high in my blood telling me I ought to flee, and I wished I could fight my way out of this tomb. Unfortunately for me, my body chose to freeze, every muscle rigid with shock. It was all an unreality of sorts. How humiliating to find that I had embraced, caressed, and slept most warmly with such a man! My only hope was that he had been unconscious and might remain so now.

Slowly, I fought back the numbness in my mind to regain control of my limbs, and I began to sit upright, pressing myself into the smallest space I could occupy and at the furthest distance from where I knew he would be. I cursed and blessed the blackness that both hid my blushing countenance and prevented me from knowing where I might safely move without encountering some part of him. As it was, there was precious little in our shared space that he did not occupy.

I heard a rustling and my heart stopped. I dared not shift an inch lest he become aware of me. I was not yet equal to the task of speaking to him. I might not ever be equal to it.

"Come, Miss Elizabeth…" His voice wafted to me, low and luxurious in the small space. It was rich with sleepiness that latched onto me like a spell. I could hardly draw breath. "Come back, you must not catch a cold."

Shocked, I uttered a gasp before I could stop it. Then I fumed at myself for giving away any reaction, for I wished desperately to spend whatever time we had left incarcerated in this unholy manner pretending he did not exist. I pulled my lips between my teeth to deny him the satisfaction of hearing me respond.

He sighed as though he expected me to act as I did, which further raised my ire. I was a mixture of humiliated shame and indignation. How dare he take such liberties as this? To take advantage of our close quarters to…to…*aargh*. I could not think, for a part of my traitorous mind reminded me that it was I who had burrowed in beside him. It was the same part that yearned to return to that warmth, rules and propriety be damned! I presume it was this insane part of my mind that was sending messages to my limbs, telling them to begin to shiver and tremble with the cold I could not now ignore. It was as if the whole of my body was begging me to concede. Every shiver that passed through me increased the aches and screams of my

injured muscles. Every breath became more painful, yet I could not, and I would not, return to him!

A cool sigh once more pierced the silence. I heard his laboured breath. It was as if I could see him in my mind, rubbing his face in exhausted irritation at my headstrong ways. I pictured his strong brow lowered in consternation, his jaw flexing that muscle along its edge with the strength of his reserve. It gave me satisfaction to think that I was a source of discontent for him as much as he was for me.

"I do not ask it of you to take advantage, Miss Elizabeth."

To this, I scoffed involuntarily, and I heard the edge to his voice as he replied. His speech had certainly lost the warmly husky quality it had had upon waking. I was grateful for that. I really was.

"I am a gentleman. It is only logic that provokes my request. I can feel you shivering from here, and as it will still be some time before we can be rescued—"

"How can you even know that, sir?" I shot back, biting my lip in dismay for being provoked into speech. Then I lifted my voice, despite the protest of my sides, to call to the groom without. "John! John, do you hear me?"

Pain hissed through my body from crying out for the groom. Mr Darcy attempted to cut me off, explaining he had woken earlier, spoken with the groom, and knew that John had left for the road down the hill to watch for the rescue caravan. I heard his words but I could not accept them, and again I raised my voice despite the knife in my side to call for John. Mr Darcy entreated me to have a care for my injuries and cease calling out. He reasoned first with words, then with his hand, as one blindly made contact with my leg, tucked as it was up against me. To his credit, he pulled back as if burned by the touch.

Startled, the ugly screech that burst out of my lips at the contact was cut off abruptly by an almighty piercing through my right side. I was being torn in half, agony slitting its way through the flesh above my ribs. My mouth opened to shout out my pain, but the air was not there to produce the sound. The throb was so excruciating that I could do nothing but freeze in horror. My mouth agape like the angel of death, I knew I must draw breath for the edges of my consciousness were becoming compromised, but the very thought of pulling air, expanding my chest for that desperately needed life source, was impossible. My mind would not allow for more of this intolerable pain.

Warm hands maladroitly found my shoulders, and with a gentleness akin to soft feathers, he eased me to stretch out. I could not speak any protest, for I had not willed myself to suck in that much-needed air, though my lungs protested for it madly. I found that at least lying down, I was able to regain a little of the lost ground in my

fight to stay sentient. Mr Darcy spoke quietly and assuredly in my ear, his words delayed in their impression in my thoughts.

"Shh. Slow, small breaths, Miss Elizabeth. Do it with me." His voice was a fevered command, yet gentle still. His hands found their way from my shoulders, down my arms, and inward to wrap around my ribs, holding them in place as I attempted to pull in a measure of air. I ought to have protested the placement of his hands, but their steady pressure was easing some of the agony. He held me in place, almost too tightly, for he prevented my instinct to gasp wide and long to pull all the air from the confined space into my angry, fiery lungs. Instead, I was forced to mimic his breathing, laboured and slowed just for me. I focused every mental power I had to listen for and match Mr Darcy's breathing. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

With time, my body, although unsatisfied with the slowness of relief, succumbed to the pace of intake and allowed for the gradual relaxation of my muscles, the pain subsiding with each small breath. Suddenly, a heaviness overtook me, and I could hardly keep my eyes open, let alone voice to Mr Darcy that he need not continue to bind my ribs. I was no longer in danger of breathing too deeply and aggravating my injuries; rather, every part of my body had turned to lead and I could not move. I wished only to surrender to the heady pull of sleep.

Mr Darcy's hands relaxed but he did not remove them. They added a pleasurable warmth, and I focused my sluggish thoughts on that. His breath was likewise warm against my cheek. He was correct; I ought not to have fought this delicious heat. He was like a sun in this dark hole. His whispered, calm, soothing words served only to pull me further into the desire for his rays.

"Elizabeth…settle yourself. I mean you no harm. You are safe with me. I would not hurt you."

I believed him. It made little sense to do so, but I could not doubt the sincerity in his words. There was a further sentiment that carried with his instruction, but I could not interpret it.

A shiver travelled up my spine and a slight whimper escaped my lips despite the heaviness I felt. Everywhere but where Mr Darcy touched me was cold, all the heat in the world was focused at the junction between his hands and my body. He removed one, and to my surprise, my groan was one of objection. He murmured into my hair again as he pulled his greatcoat around us—sharing the entirety of his sunshine. His hand caressed against my temple to pull the sweat-plastered hair away from my face.

"It will all be over soon, my dear. I am here. Sleep."

I told myself his endearment was imagined, for Mr Darcy must hate this entrapment as much as I did, but he was wise. We both

needed the warmth of the other. The cold only exacerbated the stiffness in our bruised and injured bodies. I searched my mind and could not find any argument against this breach with propriety. His warmth radiated through me, and I was spellbound and incapable of resisting its seductive pull. My thoughts once again became sluggish, incoherent, and lazy—conjuring up the impossible and incomprehensible. For it almost felt as though his lips were pressing against my brow, his firm jaw flexing along with his arms as he pulled me closer.

Chapter Four



"Miss Elizabeth, wake up. Our rescuers are near. I hear them approaching without."

Mr Darcy's hand was on my shoulder, softly shaking, mildly rubbing as he whispered in my ear. With a rush, I was awake. All the languor of sleep was instantly replaced by the stiffness of discomfort due to our positions, the impropriety of it all, and my ever-present aches. He reacted to my tension and thankfully moved to a place of some distance, however little was possible. I could tell by the stifled sounds he tried to hide that movement for him was just as injurious as it would be for me.

I did not open my eyes, for it had not mattered whether they were open or shut since light did not exist in our mausoleum of sorts. And given my frequent bouts of both unconsciousness and exhaustion, keeping my eyes shut tight brought its own measure of comfort. But as I opened them then, I found to my delight that slight shapes and perimeters were taking form. It was still dark, but my eyes could see Mr Darcy, marvel at the stones surrounding us, and make out that the source of light was through a gap in the top of our enclosure, where blessedly, I could see the grey-blue early hour sky!

This discovery brought me immeasurable relief. The blanket of doom, of uncertainty, that carpeted us the entire time, seemed to become thinner all because of that small patch of sky! It was but perhaps the size of my hand, so it was hardly a means of rescue, but it was something. It was freedom. I turned towards my companion and exclaimed, perhaps too brightly, about what I could see.

"Sir! There is a hole right there. Can you see it?" I turned towards the gap then, hearing laboured voices, presumably from those who had come to unearth us as they trudged up the steep incline to the ruins. "Hallo!"

Immediately, I regretted my volume as pain surged through my side again.

"Take care, Miss Elizabeth." Mr Darcy's voice was low and full of warning. I blushed to recollect the consequence of the last time I had lost thought for my injuries and he was required to secure my ribs in order for me to gain a measure of relief. The realisation that with the

light, the security of having my blushes disguised from Mr Darcy was gone, which set my cheeks flaming again. I turned stiffly towards him, chin high, ready to confront whatever his reaction might be.

He remained in the same position, though he was rubbing his eyes and had an almighty scowl upon his face. With every minute, the light grew brighter and I could detect more aspects of his expression, and it only fuelled my frustration. I recalled as I looked at him that his warning about my injuries was unnecessarily gruff. For all the gentleness, for all the controlled compassion he had demonstrated to me during the night, it would seem that in the light of day, Mr Darcy was Mr Darcy still: aloof and full of a selfish disdain for the feelings of others.

Suddenly, I could not suffer another minute with him, and it was clear he had used up his store of patience for me. Luckily, I had greater things to think on for the others had reached us.

"Hallo! Darcy? Miss Elizabeth?"

"Mr Bingley!" I cried, tears forming in my eyes unbidden. "We are both here."

The relief was evident in his voice. "Oh, I am glad to hear it, Miss Elizabeth. Come, men! Gather around." His voice was infused with a particular measure of control and authority I had not heard in it before. I spared a thought for my sister, and was glad for his ability to take a stand in a situation. It had privately been a source of worry to me, for I knew Mr Bingley's friend held a certain ability to sway.

"Miss Elizabeth, your father is here. He is just making his way up now. Where are you speaking from? I do not see the gap."

For a brief moment, I could not speak. I was struck with the intense desire to be in my father's arms once again. My delay in speech caused Mr Darcy to speak for me.

"Bingley, what is the situation out there?'

"Darcy, my friend! I am relieved to hear your voice and know you are alive. By the by, are either of you seriously injured? I have called the apothecary, and he is here with us. Though little good it will do until we get you out."

"Bingley—"

"My God, if I did not think the whole damned slope had slid off! Pardon, Miss Elizabeth. Darcy, the rains must have compromised the soil. A section of earth slid down into the ruins and pushed them atop of you both. If I can just find where your voices are coming from…"

The running way that Mr Bingley spoke split my face into a grin despite my disbelief at his explanation. I tried to picture the terrain we viewed yesterday and could not fathom what he described. Nevertheless, the restlessness brewed inside me and I could spare little care for the cause of our entombment; rather, I rejoiced that soon we

might be brought swiftly out of it. In my amusement at Mr Bingley's rambling manner, I turned to Mr Darcy to share it with him. I suspected it must be just as comforting to him to hear another familiar voice. Oddly, Mr Darcy was lying flat on his back, his eyes wide and searching. His expression was not one of amusement but of controlled panic. It made little sense, for surely, we were shortly to be free.

I turned once again to Mr Bingley. "There is a gap in the rocks. I cannot describe exactly where it is as I cannot see what you see, sir, but from what little I can tell from the growing light, it may face the east."

"Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. That is helpful."

I heard Mr Bingley instruct the others. Gravel scuffled as bodies moved and men searched about. Suddenly, I realised I might guide them to it myself, and I chastised my ignorance for not thinking of it sooner. The dull throbbing of my mind must have been to blame, but nevertheless, I lifted my arm and wormed my hand and wrist through the gap as best I could. Despite my determination not to show it, the pain split me in half and manifested itself with a low moan.

Mr Darcy sat up, his hands splayed out in supplication. "You ought not strain yourself, Miss Elizabeth."

I gritted my teeth through the sharp stabs and answered him, jaw tightly closed as I murmured the words. "I am showing Mr Bingley our location."

The glare I turned towards him seemed to bother him little, for he acted as if my actions were careless rather than necessary for our rescue. Something about the wild look in his eyes, though, kept me from voicing any further biting retorts. His hands reached for me, but in that haphazard manner of one who does not know where to reach. I imagined he was just as embarrassed as I was about any touch experienced in the dark of night and hesitant to add to them by daylight.

My focus was not long on my companion for I heard a shout as someone saw my meagre fingers poking through the rocks. Soon, warm, gloved hands clasped them and I choked with my tears.

Mr Bingley pressed my hand and called for my father, who was shown where he might carefully stand to reach me safely.

I looked up, blinking at the dust that dislodged from the hole, and the sight before my eyes as soon as I was able to see clearly, was that of the worry-worn face of my father, half obscured by the smallness of the gap. We both expelled watery laughs. He pressed my fingers with love, and I pulled my hand free in order to see more of him.

"Well, my Lizzy, what scrapes have you found yourself in this time?'

My lips lifted at his usual laconic wit. I wiped the tears from my

face, feeling them smear dust upon my cheeks. My gloves were ruined, naturally, and just as dirty, so I was sure the gesture only added to the grime.

"Just a bit of the usual, Papa." Joy was a third presence in our tomb then, pressed into the small space. The pain in my ribs was ignored for the greater measure of hope that seeing my father produced.

"And Mr Darcy, you are in there too?" My father's voice was changed; gone was the affection of a parent, replaced with a mixture of concern and dislike.

"Yes, sir."

I did not look to see Mr Darcy. I could not tear my eyes away from my father, who then grimaced and spoke to me.

"Well, I suppose we ought to see about getting you both out of there. Take care if you can. I am told the rocks in places are unstable and further collapses are possible. We shall do what we can to move quickly, but we may have to be measured in our attempts."

"Yes, Papa." I stared up at him, loath for the moment his face would be replaced by the sky when he moved to begin with the others to unearth us. He must have recognised my feelings—surely, they were clear for any to see—as he hesitated a moment.

"Take care, Lizzy. And here, you might wish to take some of this; I can see the pain in your eyes."

He lowered a hip flask down the small gap for me, and I attempted a bit of levity as I saw it. He would never have permitted any of his daughters to partake of such a gentlemanly drink as brandy. He smiled sadly, and I caught a glimpse of what he did not wish for me to see: his worry for me and apprehension for a successful rescue. Then his face transformed into a scowl.

"Mr Darcy, do what you can to keep my Lizzy from further harm."

Mr Darcy's expression displayed little emotion as he answered in the affirmative to my father. His eyes settled in my general direction but did not have the courtesy to make contact with mine. With a silent huff, I turned to my father.

We bid an overly cheerful goodbye, and that hated moment came when his face was replaced by the sky. I heard the efforts of the men outside, and I wished them all quick work.

Dust and minor debris began to be shifted out of their resting places for we were rained down upon by small pebbles, wet earth, and verdure. Mr Darcy encouraged me to take shelter near him, and while I would rather not have done so, I conceded, seeing he was likely in the safest place of our small enclosure. He was next to the solid wall of the ruin, above which another part of the wall had broken off as one piece, forming the roof over his head. Mr Darcy was sitting in the

nook of this tenting of rock wall pieces. The rocks there were still firm in their mortar joints—secure and solid. Whereas in my location near the opening, I could see they were just a haphazard piling of loose stones, apt to give way at any time.

Making my way carefully over to his side, I settled next to him with as much space between us as possible.

His sigh drew my attention. “You might wish to…It might be more prudent if we were to…”

His hand brushed my arm haphazardly at first, pulled back, and then with more measured movements, came around my shoulders. I wanted to protest right away the need for such measures, and indeed the words were hot upon my lips, but I saw a few of the smaller rocks on the other side of our space shifting and occasionally falling. The idea that we could be buried further inside here and never get out had me pressing myself against his side despite the impropriety. His arms rose and his hands protected my head whenever we were peppered with any significant amount of dust. His efforts were laudable, but if he were to protect my head from any falling debris, who was going to protect his?

My eyes were glued to him, feeling in some ways as if I were seeing him for the first time. He was turned towards me but his gaze was averted. There was a determination on his face that was not unfamiliar, yet not the same as what was usually there. His eyes had a distracted aspect to them that I could never forget. Perhaps he felt the same measure of fear that I did. Tentatively, I lifted the flask that was locked tightly in my grip up to him. He did not so much as acknowledge my offering, but continued to grimace and stare to the side, lost in his own thoughts, I presumed.

“Mr Darcy, here is a bit of my father’s flask. It will…it may…”

“I thank you, Miss Elizabeth.” His hands were uncharacteristically clumsy as he reached for it.

I was a little astonished, truth be told, with how disconcerted Mr Darcy seemed by the circumstances of our rescue. Until that morning, he had acted assured and calm. I would have thought him more a man of action, less anxious and bewildered by it all. His agitation seeped into me like a sickness, and I was infected with it.

Mr Darcy opened the flask, but to my surprise, he offered it to me first with unexpected gallantry. I nodded, reaching to take possession of the metal tin once again and slowly brought it to my lips. Thirst from long going without made me imprudent and I tipped it high, swallowing a large dose. The fiery burn clawed down my throat like a beast and caused me to choke violently. Mr Darcy was binding my ribs before I could so much as gasp at the agony of it. When the beast’s cut abated and I was able to draw breath enough to speak, he loosened his

hold.

"Easy, my dear girl. Easy." His crooning voice was unfamiliar, yet expected somehow. I managed to nod inelegantly and pushed the flask into his hand.

His large, capable fingers surrounded mine as he took the flask from me. His eyes bore through me with a question on his face for my well-being. Once I spoke of my relative ease, he lifted the container to his lips.

I do not know what possessed me then to watch his every movement. His eyes were closed so I was assured of some measure of secrecy for my actions, but I could not help but take in every movement of his face as he took a pull from the drink. The way his firm, full lips pressed against the edge of the spout creating a seal forced me to swallow at the intimacy of knowing the last things to touch that very spot of the flask were my own lips. Mr Darcy, unlike me, must have been accustomed to the burn of the spirits for he did not so much as flinch as he drank. The cravat hanging limply around his neck had long been loosened from its normal restriction, and I could see his Adam's apple move as he swallowed. Unconsciously, I mimicked the action and swallowed down a heavy measure of…some emotion.

My throat felt parched again.

Mr Darcy was a handsome man. His character had never diminished that quality in my thoughts, though I did not allow myself to think of it much. Now, while I unabashedly watched him rest his head back against the rocks behind us, eyes still closed as he savoured the drink, I thought I must admit that his features had a bewildering draw about them. As much as I disliked sharing a roof with him a se'nnight ago when Jane was ill at Netherfield, I was now honest enough to acknowledge that part of the allure of arguing with him—of expressing opinions that were not always my own—was to see the spark in his eyes when we sparred. It gave me an excuse to cast my eyes upon him, to return a little of the examination that he always dealt to me with his impervious stare. Unlike when his gaze would seize into me, I did not look upon him to find fault. No, it was much more shameful. For I looked upon Mr Darcy for the simple pleasure of it.

He opened his eyes, and I averted my gaze immediately. I hoped he would attribute the pink in my cheeks to the aftermath of the spirits. And I hoped I could convince myself that the warmth I felt in that very same area was also due to the brandy.

Despite the sounds and shifting debris falling about us, our rescue was not accomplished for many hours. Progress without was communicated at times to us through my father or Mr Bingley. The

earth was excessively wet still, the mud that slid from the gaping wound in the slope was heavy and cumbersome to move. The rocks of the ruins also were at times a source of delay, as parts of the old chapel walls would crumble more, and our rescuers were forced to stop to consider where they might safely proceed.

Mr Darcy and I did not exchange any more words. I did not partake of any more of the brandy even though its warmth was welcome. By silent agreement, we sat side by side, my frame tucked securely next to Mr Darcy's as we waited for release. Eventually, directly in front of us, a gaping hole opened up with the grunts of many accompanying it. Soon, Mr Bingley, covered in soil and a little dishevelled from assisting the other rescuers, could be seen crouching down and peering in.

"Well, I suppose you may wish to come out now?" he said with breathy laughter. The physical work required for this last portion was evident in the way his shoulders heaved deep breaths. He reached in as if he were assisting me down from a carriage, "Miss Elizabeth?"

I paused only a second because I could not believe we were actually free. My eyes spared a glance over at Mr Darcy, who, while shifting to his knees to follow me out, had an expression upon his face that was unreadable. His eyes were still unfocused in that way that suggested he was uncertain as to what his next actions must be.

It mattered little for I was free to go, and I reached a hand to allow Mr Bingley to pull me securely from the semi-darkness of the rock tomb and out into the bright sun of a near-noon day. Instinctively, I covered my eyes to the light while they adjusted. In the process, I found myself engulfed in the familiar, warm strength of my father's arms.

He gingerly moved me away, and I could hear Mr Darcy murmur something to his friend and make his own tentative way towards the opening. When we were some twenty paces removed, I turned to where we had spent the night, only to gasp at the sight. The wall—that had extended some fifteen feet into the heavens when we stood beside it seeking shelter from the rain—had broken in thirds. The middle section of the chapel had fallen at an angle against the portion still standing, providing our small cave, and the last third had crumbled around the rest, sealing us in. All about it, rich dark soil spilled upon the ground in thick, reaching arms. Up the slope, a gash cut through the hill like some divinely wielded sword had slashed downward in godly vengeance. With the earth cut open, its bowels had spilled upon the chapel ruins. I did not know, looking at it then, how it was possible that we had survived such an act of God. My eyes sought out the man to whom I owed my life, and who had likewise escaped the impossible.

He was just emerging from the rubble. His arms splayed out and caught his friend as the two stumbled a little in the effort to put Mr Darcy upright.

He stood then but held fast to the support of Mr Bingley. I supposed, short of having a family member near with whom to rejoice, a good friend was just as welcome a sight. I was glad for Mr Darcy to have such a friend with him. Something did not seem right, though. Something about his actions as he was leaving our rock enclosure struck me as strange, and I could not decide right away what it was. Mr Bingley led Mr Darcy off some ways to rest upon a small boulder, and I continued watching them, mesmerised, for I could not shake the feeling there was something I was missing about it all. By this time, my father had helped me to sit and rest myself too, as Mr Jones made his way towards me.

I turned my attention away from Mr Darcy and his friend, trying to shake loose what my sluggish mind was not grasping. Mr Jones began his examination, first, of the many abrasions and cuts I bore. By rote, I answered his questions, allowing him to make a preliminary conclusion about my fitness to endure the carriage ride home, and gratefully received the morsel of bread and cup of water provided for me by my father. Still, all the while, my mind whirled over and over the memory of seeing Mr Darcy emerge from the rocks. It was such a silly thing, but I could not help recount it a few times. My eyes found him and locked there. After seeing to my most pressing and initial needs, the apothecary had left me with my father and gone to see to my former companion. Mr Jones spoke to him now and although Mr Darcy replied, his manner seemed a little odd. Then it struck me with the force of a pile of rocks to my chest. When Mr Darcy had emerged from the darkness of our shelter, he had not grimaced at the light. He had not so much as reacted to the brightness of the sun in his face. His eyes remained wide, lost and unfocused.

Why? Then the horrific truth became exceedingly clear. Mr Darcy could not see. Somehow, impossible though it seemed to be, Mr Darcy was blind.

Chapter Five



No, no, it could not be. Mr Darcy could not have lost his sight. It did not make sense, for I could see with my own eyes that his face had not sustained any injury. I swiped such an ignoble, preposterous conclusion from my thoughts. Perhaps he was more able than I to handle the change in brightness emerging from our shelter. Yet I could not tear my eyes from where he sat speaking to Mr Jones, Mr Bingley at his side, a frown marring his normally tranquil features. Even as I watched Mr Jones wave a hand in front of Mr Darcy's face with no change altering that man's countenance, I could not allow the truth to take root. Mr Jones next examined the wound on the back of Mr Darcy's head, his exploration causing the patient to wince. I had nearly forgotten about his head wound; it felt it had been ages since I had ministered to him as he lay unconscious. I felt now that he had done more for me than I to him to care for injuries sustained. I felt my cheeks heat and my heart beat faster just thinking of those first dark hours after waking.

"Lizzy…Lizzy, are you well? Shall I call the apothecary back?"

I blinked, turning slowly from watching the gentlemen to my father. His grizzly mien was plagued with fatigue lines. His normally crystal-clear blue eyes were disquieted, and I could imagine what I must look like through his eyes. Dishevelled, covered in soil and moss, slow and senseless in my manner. No wonder his gaze, usually surrounded by laugh lines, was creased with strain and barely-restrained fear.

I was sluggish and stupid in my thoughts, for I could not ease his worries as quickly as I ought. My mind was simply blank, empty of rational thought. I knew I ought to reassure him that I was well. Other than the injuries Mr Jones had pronounced, I believed I was simply stunned and exhausted.

When I felt the trembling of the earth begin again, my sluggish mind snapped to attention and fear gripped my heart—a startled gasp escaped me as I reached out with iron grasp to hold my papa's arm. I looked to him with concern only to find to my consternation that the world had not begun to shake again. The trembling was coming from me, and I could no longer hold to any semblance of calm. Every limb

was shaking, my grasp upon the sleeve of my father's coat shaking his arm.

Immediately, he pulled his jacket off and draped it about me on top of the grey wool blanket that had at one point been placed on me, though I knew not when. With distracted attention, I heard him summon Mr Jones again. His voice was strange in its fierceness, for my father never used tones so solemn and grim. He was always full of sardonic wit, even in grave situations. I looked to where Mr Jones was and saw that my father's call had all the gentlemen standing. Mr Bingley began to follow Mr Jones, who immediately trudged across the uneven ground towards us. Mr Darcy, too, wished to follow but stumbled over a rock, which caused his friend to turn and insist he seat himself again. Mr Bingley stayed with his friend then and looked at me with concern.

It was as if I was watching it all as a play. A drama unfolding in a language I could not translate. Why should Mr Bingley need to restrain his friend and persuade him to stay? Soon, Mr Jones was near me again and lifting his eye glass to his view as he covered one of my eyes and then the other.

"I believe she is quite in shock, Mr Bennet. Her shivering is testament to it along with the dilation of her eyes."

They continued to speak of my condition, though truth be told, only one in five words were even discernible to me. All I could think was that I had nearly died. I had nearly died! In that moment I did not care for either my father's or Mr Jones's thoughts on the matter. I did not wish to have either of them fussing about my person, adjusting blankets and trying to get me to drink a little more water. I obliged them, naturally, for I wished they would finish and step aside. Deep within me, all I wanted…all I needed…I felt it was…no, it made little sense. I had, perhaps, in the horror of the whole experience, lost a little sanity. For it seemed to me that the only thing that could calm the beast of panic rising within my breast—the only medicine I needed to see myself to rights—was the calm presence of the man who had likewise escaped death with me; the man whose formidable brow was furrowed in discontent as he faced in my general direction.

That realisation, oddly enough, was sufficient to bring me a measure of control over my cascading thoughts. It was such an absurd notion that I should feel a need for Mr Darcy. Perhaps I was in shock as Mr Jones had said. It would all be put to rights soon, I was sure.

In time, my breathing began to slow a little and I felt myself settle. My father was insisting that I be allowed to be brought home, and Mr Jones, having witnessed my state, agreed. I looked up at my father as he spread his arms wide, holding the blanket that had been wrapped about my shoulders. His actions meant to lend me some privacy, it

seemed, for Mr Jones began to wrap my ribs tightly with a length of muslin. The pressure of the binding added relief with the immobilisation of my ribs but also restricted my breathing exhaustingly.

My mind left me then to recall Mr Darcy's steady and firm hands pressing on my sides in the enclosure. I recalled their incredible warmth permeating my thin pelisse while the gentle tones of his voice whispered in my ear, 'be calm'. The feel of the binding was similar, and I wondered that Mr Darcy knew from what I suffered how best to give relief. Mr Jones had said I likely had a few broken ribs, that recovery would be long and painful.

Blinking, I brought myself to the present as Mr Jones finished his work. I looked up at my father.

"I am well, Papa." I squeaked out, gladdened that the trembling of my limbs was less pronounced and my voice was steadier. "I am merely exceedingly tired."

Mr Jones and my father debated the best method of transporting me to the carriage down the hill. The former was convinced that a litter would jar my injuries worse, and with the forthcoming carriage ride, he felt it would do me less harm to walk down the hill of my own accord with some assistance. With reluctance, my father conceded to the plan and called for aid from one of Mr Bingley's strong footmen.

"We will have you home soon, Lizzy. Here, take this."

From his jacket he produced a small vial. He rightly interpreted the question on my face for he answered unprompted, "Mr Jones gave it to me earlier for your pain. 'Tis laudanum. I intended to recommend you take some of it when you…"

When I lost myself in panic, remembered pain and terror, became senseless in my trembling, and succumbed to my nerves. He did not need to say it, for we both knew what was left unsaid. The strain around his eyes told me his concern for my state of health did not end with the extent of my physical injuries.

Nodding, I accepted the laudanum. He placed the brown glass vial in my hand, and I unstopped the top and drank down the bitter tonic. Grimacing, I moved to hand the bottle back to my father with one hand, the other covering my mouth, trying to not fall prey to a cough, knowing the pain that would overtake me if I did.

With a gentle push of my hand, my father urged me to take more, reasoning it was a long carriage ride home and the jarring would not be pleasant. I agreed reluctantly, disliking the foul taste and the foggy sluggishness of thought I expected would come soon.

"Here, let us attempt the hill now, Lizzy. Before the tonic takes hold."

How we managed to make it to the carriage, I cannot recall with clarity. I remember only the screaming of my ribs, the suffocating lack of air, and the pain hazing my vision as my father, with the help of a groom, walked me part way down the hill to the carriages. At one point, I remember the edges of my vision dimming then going dark, followed by the rough pull of my bindings as I was lifted and carried the rest of the way. The pain was beyond anything I had ever experienced. I wanted to protest for them to put me down, for being pressed into the side of the groom carrying me intensified the screaming of my broken bones worse than walking had. But I could not speak a word to stop it all, the tearing in my side sending echoes of anguish cascading around in my mind.

Soon, however, the torture was over, and I was placed standing next to the carriage, trying to catch my breath, my father's steadying hand holding me upright. He argued then with Mr Jones, insisting I was not well enough to travel, should not have had to endure the walking, for clearly, I could not manage it.

With laboured breaths, I managed to forestall any more of my father's concerned vexations. Between measured breaths, I confirmed what Mr Jones was saying; that walking had been better, that I was well and needed only a minute to recover. I reassured my father as best as I could that soon the laudanum would do its trick and I would have some relief.

"We ought to have waited till it took hold of you."

I gave him a slight smile; perhaps he was right in that at least. But I wondered how I was meant to walk at all if insensible with laudanum. No, Mr Jones had been right. Although it was an unbearable journey down the hill, it was better made before my senses were gone.

A sound to my right caught my attention, and I looked to see Mr Darcy on the arm of his friend make it down the hill to the other waiting carriage. My eyes, I knew, would be a little glossy with the beginning effects of the tonic, and my brow covered with perspiration from the descent from the ruins. No doubt the rest of my state would be appalling, yet I wished with a fervour that could not be explained for him to look at me. Everything inside me, every vestige of mental strength I had left, willed him to look my way and share with me our burden; communicate that he, too, was overwhelmed, filled to the brim with a mixture of relief and panic for being out of our tomb. I needed the communion such a look with him would give me, but Mr Darcy was hesitant in his steps, his face placid and dull. He did not look at me at all.

When they reached his carriage, he spoke to Mr Bingley. I could hear only the tones of their exchange, for my mind was beginning to

feel the fog enter, creeping in the edges and lapping at my lucid thoughts. Mr Bingley disagreed with his friend, but Mr Darcy—ever commanding and in control—seemed to insist. His friend wavered, but after ensuring Mr Darcy had found the handhold of the carriage, reluctantly began walking our way.

My father was attempting to persuade me to take my seat in the carriage. I nodded groggily, and with the help of the groom—everyone careful to follow Mr Jones' spoken instructions—I was settled with surprising swiftness and little pain into the carriage.

I listened as my father turned at the sound of Mr Bingley's voice. I wished heartily that I could understand a word of the whispered exchange, but my head had become exceedingly heavy and the weight of my eyelids almost impossible to hold up. My father glanced at me in the carriage, then with a nod of his head, returned with Mr Bingley to their carriage.

I knew that I could not simply allow myself to slip into a stupor, no matter how lovely the seduction of pain relief or how much my mind begged me to. I leaned my head heavily against the squabs of the carriage and looked out the window to where my father was nearing Mr Darcy.

They spoke only briefly, the discomfort on all their faces clear even to one whose mental lucidness was as hindered as mine. Neither gentleman seemed sanguine about the subject of their discourse, but Mr Darcy seemed adamant and my father appeared resigned in the end. He glanced back at me, and I saw his face but could no longer interpret his look. He returned his attention to Mr Darcy and nodded reluctantly. Mr Bingley said something to Mr Darcy and that man returned the gesture to my father. I supposed I was the subject of their discussion, though I had little enough strength to fathom of what they might have to speak.

Mr Darcy then lifted his chin and turned in my direction, the determination on his brow incongruent with the worry about his eyes. I used every bit of wit I had left to keep myself alert enough to see him look my way. It was not the communion I had wished for earlier, for his eyes were as unfocused as I was sure mine were. But that was the last thought I would have as the gentleman's image faded from view. The fog had taken hold of me, the haze closing my eyes and submerging me in inky darkness.

Chapter Six



"Will you do me the honour, Miss Elizabeth?"

Reluctantly, I accept and place my hand in his as he leads me to the centre of the grassy knoll. His handsome features are smug as if he knows exactly what kind of power he can wield with the fairer sex. I want to resist him, knowing that Mr Darcy needed no further reason to look down his straight nose at me, but like the pull of his hand, I am swept up into his space with little will to do otherwise.

As if compelled, my eyes seek his and lock with the dark blue depths of them, all the while his arms pull me this way and that in the steps of a dance. A dance outside? I struggle to make sense of it. My cheeks flood and I am conscious of the scene we must be making. I am furious with myself for my inability to look away. Although I can hear people around me and know they must be speaking of us as we dance, I cannot help myself, for my eyes are hungry for his. They crave the compulsion to follow what Mr Darcy demands, the security felt within his gaze.

In the next twirl, Mr Darcy shocks me as he pulls me right up to his chest, changing our positions seamlessly into that of a waltz. I open my mouth to rebuke him, my heart clamouring, my blood heating my skin. His eyes assault me, compelling me to look only at him. Faster and faster we spin, my mind becoming dizzy and faint. Mr Darcy grows more focused with each turn, pulling me closer to him till I can feel the strength of his shoulders under my fingers and the warmth of his body overwhelming me.

His eyes—midnight blue and piercing—seem to tell me something, but the world around me fades faster and faster, the knoll getting smaller and my senses tumbling out of control.

We stop so suddenly, I feel my insides continue to whirl within. Only then am I able to break gaze with my partner. But the lush hill is gone now, and all I see is dark, dank earth, and we are surrounded by it. Then it moves, closing in and pressing on us.

Naturally, I turn to Mr Darcy, a scream at the ready, for we are soon to be crushed by the earth, buried and pressed into the soil. His hands go to my shoulders and begin to shake me.

"Elizabeth, Elizabeth!" he repeats as his eyes lose their focused

stare. They beg me to find something, to see something in their depths, but I cannot. The ground will soon swallow us up. My heart blocks my throat and I cannot breathe.

"Elizabeth!"

~

When my eyes opened, I was staring at the white plaster ceiling above me, my temples slick with sweat and my breaths coming in quick succession. Utter terror still swam in my veins like a disease. The torture that radiated from my ribs brought me quickly to the present, and I realised I had only experienced another alarming dream induced by the laudanum. With a final shudder, I vowed to not take another dose.

"Elizabeth!" Jane called me gently, her hands on my shoulders where Mr Darcy's had been. It was her voice that called me from sleep.

By force of will, my mind pushed away from the feelings that still cascaded through me, singeing through my veins, and I allowed myself to gladden at her appearance.

"Jane," my little-used voice croaked.

"You were dreaming again, Lizzy. I feared you would do yourself an injury with all your thrashing about."

The bedclothes were tangled around me, pulled tight and restricting. With exhausted hands, I fumbled to pull myself free, and Jane, soon discerning my intent, was quick to lend some help.

Once free of the blankets, I felt I could finally let go of the remnants of the dream that still lingered like a fog in my mind. I told myself that, as Mr Darcy and I had both experienced the horrifying ordeal, it was only natural for my mind to force his presence into my dream state. Besides, the drug was known to have ill effects such as strange dreams. In the several days since our rescue, I had been prescribed laudanum for the pain, and with each dose, my mind would enter a fevered otherworld with only one other person: Mr Darcy.

Sometimes the dreams were simply fanciful with strange animals and vivid colours, though Mr Darcy's presence was a constant. At other times, like this most recent one, the dream was all too terrifyingly realistic. A waltz with Mr Darcy felt mortifyingly real, though something I had never experienced. My skin prickled with gooseflesh as I recalled the feel of his arms about my person, the warmth of his breath on my brow, and the unfathomable depths of his eyes.

Given that I had sworn never to dance with that gentleman, it was

more than disconcerting to find we had partnered for more than one set in my drug-altered dreams. It must also have been due to the elixir that I found our dream dances as pleasurable as they were unnerving.

"Here, Lizzy, have some tea. I had Hill refresh the pot only a few minutes before you woke."

I attempted to sit up further, and Jane quickly bent over to assist me in the process. With clenched teeth, I managed the move with barely more than a low moan escaping my lips. Once upright, I took a moment, eyes closed tightly, to breathe through the pulsing that I felt from the change in position.

"Oh, Sister…" Jane's eyes filled with tears as she tried to adjust a pillow, her hands fluttering around too uselessly to offer me any real relief. "Are you in very much pain? It is near enough time that you might have another small dose."

I needed to speak, to object, regardless of whatever anguish I was likely to endure as a result. I simply would not continue to have such disconcerting and confusing hallucinations as I was having.

I lifted my hand in supplication, and to my intense relief, Jane set down the dark glass bottle next to the tea pot.

"No more, Jane. I cannot take more of it."

"But you can, Lizzy. As I said, 'tis not too soon."

"I cannot take more, because I cannot stand any more of the vile stuff."

Jane frowned at me in disapproval. "Mr Jones said you ought to spare yourself the pain of your injury; it will allow you to recover sooner."

I disagreed, for I was sure I was not resting any easier with Mr Darcy invading my consciousness in all manner of impossible ways. I would much rather battle the discomfort than have the effects of the laudanum if I might gain a measure of my sanity back.

"I experience the most…the dreams are too much. I feel like I do not know what is real and what is not most of the time."

She was hesitant to allow me to have my way in this and so I waited, hoping she would see the desperation in my eyes. The pain in my sides was beginning to throb again something awful, and while I had not moved to give my ribs any further reason to protest, I could tell from this increase in discomfort that the previous dose was indeed wearing off. I could not allow her to know how plagued I was, or she would never concede to my wishes to give up the medicine.

I reached for her hand and pressed it gently for a moment. I had never kept anything from my dearest sister nor told her so much as the smallest falsehood, yet the lie came quickly to my lips.

"Truly, Jane, I am well. I feel I am healing and do not need more."

My watery smile was returned as she smoothed hair off my brow

with the utmost of tenderness. Her actions nearly forced a confession from me. This was my dear sister, who wanted only to see me hale and healed with the least amount of discomfort to be had in the process.

I held her hand to my face and smiled as best I could.

"Oh, Lizzy, I do not like it, but if you say you are doing better, I will not insist."

I wanted to breathe deeply at her reply but knew I ought not. Feeling the thick straps of binding about my chest, I remembered that I probably could not anyway.

"I was so very worried for you," she whispered, her emotion hidden in the task of preparing a cup of tea for me. "I tell you, when the ground began to shake, I hardly knew what was happening!"

My interest was piqued, and I felt I must know everything. This was the first time she had willingly spoken of our walk to Bodden Chapel. Since our rescue, little opportunity had arisen to speak to her of the events of that day due to the near constant state of detachment I felt from the elixir. Another reason to push through without it.

"Please tell me what happened as you saw it."

I knew she was hesitant because she bit the edge of her lip in that way she does when she is nervous. I could see in that moment, as her eyes clouded with pain, that she, too, found that day difficult. Even though she was not injured, the torment she had to endure was worrying for me.

"I fear you had a sore trial waiting for word of us."

Jane nodded and a single tear edged out of her full lashes. "It was excruciating. I thought…we all feared you were gone."

Dead. I realised that it must have seemed likely. I shuddered and suppressed the groan that such a movement wanted to produce.

Jane haltingly described what happened when the mudslide occurred. She and Mr Bingley, thankfully, had stepped back some from the ruin walls when the trembling began. Mr Bingley was trying to discern what it was that his friend was focused on behind us, and so he had guided Jane to step away from the stone wall with the intent to look up, as Mr Darcy was, at the slope behind the ruins.

Then Mr Darcy shouted to Mr Bingley to run just before he leapt at me. In that moment, Mr Bingley pulled Jane, stumbling, away down the hill and against a tree. Despite the picture forming in my mind of the horrific scene Jane was describing, I could not help but smile secretly at the way Jane blushed at this moment. Mr Bingley had held her firmly against him, his back to the moving earth, and she was protected between a large tree trunk and the gentleman.

"He held my head pressed against his chest and covered it with his other hand. I did not know what to expect, Lizzy. I had not seen what

he had, and it all happened so shockingly fast."

The noise from the mudslide was described as a dull moan of sorts, then the low clatter of rocks as they fell on each other was all she recalled for a few moments after that. They were far enough away that loose soil and small stones tumbled around them, and Jane described her surprise at seeing the mud wash around their ankles like a tide of earth. Luckily enough for my dear sister, that was all that troubled them of the collapse. The earthen wave of soil hardly came to their knees as it pushed around the base of the tree and travelled a little farther down the hill.

"Oh, Jane, how heartedly glad I am for Mr Bingley! His quick thinking had you safely against the strength of the tree."

She was blushing, I assumed, at recalling the moment herself. I could picture everything she described; I believed I could even recall the stout English oak of which she spoke, a tree of some significance. I was trying to assimilate it all with the memories I had. None of this was part of my recollection, because by this time, Mr Darcy and I had been buried and were insensate. I could not suppress the tremor that dragged through me like a rake in the leaves, leaving me raw and exposed.

"Miss Bingley, I am afraid, did not fare so well. Poor dear, it all happened so quickly—who could blame her for the state of things?"

I focused my thoughts once again on Jane. "What happened to her?"

I had not heard of any other injuries beyond that of Mr Darcy and myself, and I was sure had there been anything worse, I would have been told by then.

"Mr Darcy passed her quickly to our cousin before he went after you. Do you recall that part?"

I nodded, though the image that came vividly to me was of the fierce determination in Mr Darcy's eyes before he grabbed me. His movements just prior to that—passing his companion off to my cousin—were just a mist in the background of those eyes that bored into me like lightning striking straight to my heart. This time when my limbs shivered at the memory, Jane frowned and pulled my blanket further up my body. I felt an urge to know of Mr Darcy, to hear how he was, though inexplicably, my throat closed to any attempt.

"I would say our cousin cannot be blamed either. It was quite slippery with all the rain…"

I raised my brow at this, encouraging Jane to elaborate, pushing thoughts of Mr Darcy aside for now. It seemed that Mr Collins had lost his footing when Miss Bingley was placed in his care so unceremoniously that, as a result, the two of them slid down the wet grass slope, limbs intertwined, skirts fluttering, and Miss Bingley

screaming the entire way.

A small laugh bubbled up through me, and I felt the release it brought. When was the last time I had felt unburdened enough for joviality? My amusement was soon tempered when I spied the disapproving frown in Jane's expression.

"Hush, Lizzy! 'Tis not for us to find humour in the suffering of others. Miss Bingley and Mr Collins will likely have to marry now!"

I wish I could say that the fate of either of those two individuals being tied together was enough to sober my thoughts, but little would that be the truth. I was sorry they were forced into such a match for neither of them would ever be happy with the other, but somehow, I could not shake the feeling that it might just be exactly what each deserved. It was cruel of me, and I felt ashamed for my sentiments the moment that Jane, good and kind Jane, chastened me again.

"Lizzy! Miss Bingley is made quite unhappy by this and should warrant our pity."

"I should think I would have pity for any woman forced to marry our cousin. You are correct, and always the soul of goodness. Miss Bingley deserves our sympathy, for it would be the wickedest fate to be forced to wed Mr Collins, let alone where there is no affection."

I expected Jane to agree with me, to share a consoling comment for either Miss Bingley or Mr Collins. Instead, she was strangely silent on the matter. When I studied her face, it barely concealed the thoughts in her head. Pity and concern were indeed sentiments she felt, but they were coupled with a nervousness that I could not explain.

I did not like the foreboding I then felt studying my sister, who could no longer look at me directly. Perhaps it was self-preservation, perhaps it was a sense that the consequences of that mudslide were further reaching than a few broken bones, but I did not wish to know what she was thinking.

Instead, I purposely made my voice light as I asked, "What happened then? What of a rescue attempt?"

Jane hesitated almost as though she had come to some decision and felt she needed to follow it through. After a moment she shook her head and answered me.

"As soon as the earth ceased trembling and the ground stopped, Mr Bingley assured himself that I was well and bade me stay by the tree. He called for his grooms to assist his sister and for Mr Collins to stand and see Miss Bingley to the carriage safely. He was so focused and commanding, Lizzy. It was…it was…pleasing."

I smiled at the pink of her cheeks with this confession.

"Soon after, he directed his men to assist him in locating you and Mr Darcy. I was so terrified. We called for you but could not hear any

response. All we saw of the ruin was piles of rocks and mud and…you and he…we did not know how you could have survived."

I reached for my sister's hand and received a surprisingly strong squeeze in return. I listened to Jane narrate the rest of what should have given me any number of intense feelings, but instead I heard it all with a strange detachment. The men tried multiple times to move the earth and rock to dig us out, but the ground was unstable. The rains were coming down so rapidly that with every attempt to gain purchase on the rubble, more ground would fill in their meagre efforts. Mr Bingley was reluctant to step aside and stop the search for his friend until my sister persuaded him.

"With difficulty, I stepped my way to Mr Bingley to entreat him to wait for further help, for the rain to stop, for anything but to keep digging, only to have more ground fall on you both. I feared further collapse doing greater damage or resulting in more injuries to others."

I was impressed by my sister in that moment. I knew that a gentleman like Mr Bingley would not stop at anything to find us, but given how Jane described the ever-shifting ground, I am thankful she entreated him to halt. Although it could not have been easy for her to insist on a delay in the rescue—as I know she would have been quite distraught with worry for me—she possessed foresight that might have saved our lives. It did not bear considering what further collapses might have been created under such wet and unstable conditions.

"How such a choice must have haunted you, Jane!"

I gathered her into my arms, and with the utmost care, she climbed onto the mattress beside me. For a few moments both of us let out some much-needed tears. It was a purge of the pain and worry built over hours of anguish, the anguish that comes with not knowing.

With hiccupping breaths, Jane said that the rest was quite hard to recall, as they, with heavy hearts and burdened souls, reluctantly prepared to leave. Mr Bingley left a groom to attend—and to attempt a rescue again should the rain let up and allow conditions to be more favourable. Mr Bingley vowed to return as soon as possible with more help.

The carriage had been loud and Jane felt a megrim begin, which would more than explain her lack of memory of this part. She recalled only that Miss Bingley was screeching and could not be calmed by her brother. Mr Collins was ceaseless in his speaking, uncouth speculations of death and disfigurement upon his lips. Jane was left comfortless as tears ran down her face while Mr Bingley looked on helplessly, impotent to give comfort to her or save their trapped loved ones.

"It was horrid. The rains did not stop, and by the time we crossed the bridge, it was a near thing to even manage it. I looked to Mr

Bingley, and we both knew in that moment that a return before daybreak would be impossible."

"Dear Jane, I shudder to think how you suffered for me, and it torments me. We are safe now, you see. No harm done." My heart clamoured against my ribs, a query about Mr Darcy's health on my lips. I could not ask it though; it felt foreign to feel such a concern for a man I had had little enough care for before the accident. Embarrassed at my lack of charity for my rescuer, I forced my lips silent. "And I daresay, in time, we shall all return to as we once were."

Jane sat up, her brow troubled as she looked me in the eye. Her mouth opened to speak but all she uttered was a feeble, "Lizzy…"

The sense that the world was closing in on me, as it had in my dream, consumed me again. I did not dare ask her what that look meant, certain it could not mean glad tidings with the way my dear sister's cornflower eyes dimmed.

Chapter Seven



In a dizzying flash, my sister transformed into an agitated and nervous wreck. Her eyes could not meet mine, yet she was speaking far too quickly for my mind to grasp whatever sins she felt compelled to confess.

"Oh, Lizzy, it is all my fault! If I had not…but you will not thank me for it. And to think your happiness is all I have ever wished—"

"Jane!" I had spoken her name many times to cease her rapid, distressed speech but to no avail until now. The volume of my voice left us both speechless, she with concern and I with agony.

My sister began again, this time with unintelligible expressions and half sobs as she swept her hands down my chin and smoothed my hair. I focused on the softness of her touch and the pain ebbed away. With gentle hands, I latched onto hers and spoke calmly, curious and not a little frightened to see the measure of distress in her features.

"Oh, Sister, come and calm yourself. What is this nonsense you speak of?"

Jane complied, and as careful as a butterfly, she rested herself again on the side of my bed, mindful not to jostle the mattress. Her eyes were more troubled than I had ever seen them, and I wondered at this. In a twinkling, I understood she felt responsible for my injuries for some unfathomable reason. Before I could so much as begin to refute what I saw in her eyes, she spoke. The halting, almost penitent sound of her voice only added to the foreboding, troubled feeling stretching my heart.

"If you only knew how much I questioned my judgment that night, Lizzy. I never slept a wink, and I could not but feel I had made the most egregious error. I believed I had likely cost you your life!"

"Jane…"

"Mr Bingley, Papa, they both assured me it was for the best, but I cannot think now that you are saved…that perhaps if I had not insisted…and when I think of Miss Bingley and our cousin. Oh, let me know you will not be made unhappy!"

Jane was getting carried away and making no more sense than before. What had Mr Collins and Miss Bingley to do with my injuries? Had the whole world gone mad when the earth moved? Nobody was

responsible for my pains but an act of God that could not have been avoided!

"I hope in time you may come to…but perhaps it is just my conscience creating fancies to assuage my guilt. He cannot be all bad, for he is a dear friend of Mr Bingley, yet…"

My head was whirling now, and not just from trying to follow Jane's fevered and disjointed confession. I closed my eyes to keep the room from spinning as well. In the blissful black behind my lids, I thought of that day. Parts were clear, but much of it was as dark as my vision now. I recalled—with a clarity that almost made me think I was back—the smell of our collapsed earthen shelter. Damp soil, but with lemon and sandalwood; the latter, Mr Darcy's scent, I now realised. As my mind slowed its twirling, the memory of those scents was replaced by the lavender of Jane's toilet water and the cool breeze from the window carrying in the smell of autumn leaves. With this bit of reality, I was ready to open my eyes again.

"Jane, please do not distress yourself. I shall be well in time." Although I had not sorted through the jumbled mess of my sister's utterances, I could no longer take her agonising speech.

With a sniffle, she nodded, grasping my hand in a fierce grip. "I asked it of Mr Bingley. I know he would not have given up if I had not. And I fear you will not thank me for preventing a more immediate rescue."

"The consequences of that day could not have been avoided had you been able to safely dig us out immediately. Can you not see? What is done is done, and I do not believe I shall suffer for it all my life."

The relief my words gave my poor sister was immediate, and she sagged physically as if no longer required to hold a great burden. I could not imagine what fear she might have felt. I know if I had seen her buried alive, I would have felt all the panic and horror she had so gracefully shouldered these many days. My heart called to her in tenderness for her great care for me. Surely the apothecary had explained to her that my ribs would heal completely in time? I could not imagine why she would look at me as if I were facing a life sentence of sorts. Yet she clearly worried a great deal. Any emotional toll was compounded as a result. When she insisted Mr Bingley cease the rescue until a safer time and with more aid, it had been the right thing. It was correct of her to stop him, and I did not like her blaming herself for my injuries when they would have been the same had we been rescued immediately or the next day as we had. There simply was not anything for which Jane should have felt guilt.

I sat up, ignoring the objections from my sides, and held her to me. As I murmured words of comfort and assurance, gratitude for her love

and concern, and affirmations of my tender regard for her, I could not shake free from a shadow that seemed to sit just outside of my awareness.

In time we separated, and I insisted on lighter topics. No more gloom and reflection. I was healing already, and even though the fog of the laudanum was still lifting, I was not made for ill-humour and sought lighter subjects. While I blew gently to cool the cup of tea Jane had prepared for me, I asked her about the past few days while I was deep in the stupor of the apothecary's elixir. Mr Darcy stayed a spectre in my thoughts, and I consigned myself to asking after him soon. It was only right, and my conscience told me so. Any feeling human would wish to know how he was; it meant nothing more. For now, seeing the brightness in my sister's eyes justified my delay. Mr Bingley, it seemed, had called frequently to speak to my father and Mr Collins, and, of course, to see Jane.

The bloom in her cheeks told me that the sentiments of that gentleman were far from indifferent, even while he was visiting on less tasteful business than wooing my dearest sister. Mr Collins required persuasion, it seemed, to not set off with all haste for Netherfield to do his duty as a gentleman and save Miss Bingley's reputation. I laughed softly at the recounting Jane gave of the many times our father and Mr Bingley were required to insist he wait and allow the lady to recover.

"Was Miss Bingley very much injured by their slide down the slope?"

Jane smirked, shaking her head softly as she traded my now empty cup with a plate of shortcake. "Overwrought emotionally, I understand. She kept to her room for many days. I believe Mr Bingley explained the consequences of her fall and the number of witnesses to it in the form of the grooms at the carriages."

"I imagine I would be quite unwell to learn I was to wed such an ill-matched suitor."

A shadow passed over Jane's eyes and her mouth opened to reply, but a knock on my door prevented it. Our father peeked around the side of the door and his eyes crinkled at the sight of me sitting up.

I reached my hand to him and was pleased and surprisingly emotional to have him take it and seat himself at the side of my bed.

"My dear girl, you gave your Papa a great deal of fright. Aged me a decade, I would guess."

I smiled broadly at him and squeezed his hand in return. "I shall endeavour to remember your sensibilities next time I am caught in a landslide and be sure to stand clear."

He laughed as I had hoped he would, and we three settled into a comfortable visit. It was pleasant having my two favourite people with

me while I munched on cook's shortcake and relished in the way my head gained clarity. It was a rare occurrence to have such sensible conversation with calm and quiet. Speaking of…

"Where are my mother and sisters? It is far too quiet in this house for them to be here."

A look passed between Jane and Papa, and my attention was riveted on them. It was my father who at last spoke.

"Your mother and her three very silly daughters have gone to London to visit the Gardiners for a few weeks for some shopping."

Perhaps my stunned and offended feelings were not so hidden as I thought, for Jane was quick to assure me that they were very concerned for my health.

"Yes, so concerned I was buried alive that they were compelled to buy new gowns and fripperies to alleviate their great worry." I had nearly died! And my mother and sisters left for a pleasure trip to the shops of Bond Street?

"In a way, yes, Lizzy."

Displeased I shot my father a disbelieving look.

"It was that or give your mother her own regimen of laudanum."

"Papa," Jane admonished at his cavalier joke.

"I fear you will both have to do better than that if you wish me to understand and not take offence that before I am even able to sit up on my own, half of my family deserts me."

Again the two exchanged a look, and I cleared my throat.

With a sigh, my father explained that my mother was quite distressed at my injuries. So much so that her vocal and repeated exclamations of worry were deemed inconducive to my recovery by Mr Jones. It had been a topic of debate to dose both her and me, though for different reasons. Chief among her concerns was that I might have been maimed and disfigured. Added to this horror, my mother was no doubt beyond comforting upon learning that the heir to Longbourn would wed, and the bride would not be one of her own worthy daughters but Miss Bingley. I learned then that the betrothal had not been officially settled, as Miss Bingley was still being persuaded to allow Mr Collins to pay his addresses. This little bit of information brought a smile to my lips as I thought of poor Mr Bingley's Herculean efforts on that front.

Adding to this insult and the dashing of my mother's dearly-held hopes, were still more grievances to account. To a lesser extent, but first on my younger sisters' list of offences against them, excepting perhaps Mary, was the fact that this natural disaster—it could be described as no less to Mrs Bennet—would result in a few weeks postponement, if not cancellation, of the ball at Netherfield that had been planned for just a few days after the pleasure trip to Bodden

Chapel.

At this bit of news, I looked at Jane to gauge how she felt about this development. I knew she had been eagerly awaiting the night, and all her hopes had been placed in that ball for securing forever her most cherished wish regarding Mr Bingley. Jane reassured me with a squeeze of her hand. Dearest Jane, always putting others' happiness before her own. Unlike my younger sisters, she would not begrudge the loss of such a much-anticipated event to focus her efforts on my recovery.

"I wrote an express to your aunt and uncle Gardiner and received a reply as soon as could be. It was very little work after that to convince Mrs Bennet that she ought to leave the worry of your care to Jane and me, and allow Mrs Gardiner to help her and the girls choose some new items for such a time as the ball at Netherfield was rearranged."

"Mr and Mrs Gardiner will not have an easy time of it, I fear," was my reply, realising that the quiet of the house was perhaps a greater blessing, and the offense of their decampment on so flimsy an excuse should not warrant my hurt but engender my gratitude.

"No, I believe you have the right of it. They have done us a good turn, Lizzy, and I cannot help but be glad of it. Especially to see you sitting up and with so much more colour in your cheeks than was present in the past few days."

"Thank you, Papa and Jane. You have the rewards of your good care before you. I do feel better, and in time I shall be put to rights, you will see."

My father offered to read to me for a time, and I happily accepted. My thoughts soon became lost as the comforting bass tones of my father's voice melodiously floated about the room. Jane quietly tidied the tea things and rang the bell to pass them off to the maid who came to the summons. Inevitably, it seemed, my thoughts turned once more to the gentleman who had heroically jumped towards danger in an effort to protect me from the peril only he had seen coming.

It puzzled me, this act of bravery, for it did not seem to fit with what I knew of his character. Perhaps it was only an impulse of the moment, a snap decision that caused him to leap into hazard rather than flee from it. Yet I could not entirely write it off as easily as that. There had been real fear in his eyes before he jumped towards me, and I could not believe it was for the calamity that was to come. As absurd as such a notion was, I could not help but feel in my core that he had been concerned for me. That something ill happening to me was unacceptable, perhaps even agonising to him.

I shook my head free of such an illogical thought. Mr Darcy and I had never understood each other, so how could I claim the slightest understanding of the sentiments portrayed in his eyes. He was raised a

gentleman and simply acted the part of one when presented with the need to protect one of his party. But this, too, puzzled me. From all I had learned of him from his behaviour, I should have expected Mr Darcy to think of his own concerns above others.

I was beginning to feel the thoughts in my head swirl again as my mind recalled the tenderness and prompt concern Mr Darcy showed throughout the time we had been buried. Excepting for those moments when he had been unconscious, his entire focus and concern had been on securing my comfort.

A frustrated groan escaped my lips, and all too soon I regretted it, for my companions misinterpreted it to mean I was again suffering for my injuries. It was a near thing, but I was finally able to convince them both that I did not need to take any more of the Mr Jones's tonic.

"Perhaps you ought to rest some more, Lizzy."

I looked towards my father, a protest ready on my lips. Had I not already slept the better part of the days since my rescue? But even as I prepared to insist I was well, I felt exhaustion settle on my shoulders as if my father's words had the power to bring it on.

"I suppose you are right. I shall just take a little rest."

My father stood, and I watched with amusement as he patted his pockets absently as if he were searching for something. Then, finding his spectacles on the top of his head where he had placed them after reading, he returned them to his nose.

"I nearly forgot. I came up to see you, Lizzy, but also to see whether Jane might perhaps be able to decipher this scratch of sorts that Mr Bingley calls a letter." My sister's cheeks bloomed bright at the very notion she might be able to read Mr Bingley's handwriting, having never seen it before. But my father went on, unaware of the embarrassment he produced in his eldest daughter. "This missive arrived an hour or so ago, and I cannot make it out. Here, Jane, tell me what you can decipher of your beau's markings."

I could not explain it, but in an instant, all traces of fatigue vanished and I was most eager to know what news from Netherfield.

"Papa, he is not my beau…," Jane immediately and vehemently protested, even as she eagerly reached for the folded parchment. I laughed quietly as my father looked towards me with a wink.

We both watched as Jane held the letter tightly in her hands, eyes roving in awe all over it. It was not until my father cleared his throat that she recalled her purpose, and began to read it. Pausing at times, either because she had difficulty discerning the lettering or because she was exulting in becoming familiar with his handwriting, I did not know.

"'*Dear Sir, I have the pleasure of informing you that my'*—here it

looks like 'sitter' but I do believe he writes sister—'*is recovered enough to accompany me to Longbourn so that Mr Collins might settle this matter. If it is convenient, we shall call*'"—Jane squinted at the paper, though her lips were forming a smile, not at all frustrated by the blots I could see through the back side of the page—"'tomorrow!'"

Her triumphant smile made us both snicker.

"Well then, I am glad to hear of it. Mr Collins has nearly trod a path in my carpets with his eagerness to 'uphold his honour'."

I could not help the shudder that passed through me, thankful that I was not the poor woman to have to sit through the parson's proposal and then to have no other choice but to accept at the end of it!

Jane's head was again bent to the missive, and with a shared smirk, my father and I waited for her to translate more.

"'*Be advised that the delay in another's call is not without explanation. I am asked to convey to Miss Elizabeth the following. That Mr Darcy wishes to inform her he will be consulting his London pheasant*'—oh my dear, I think that is physician—'*and awaits the arrival of his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam and*'—this time I know it is not sitter," Jane giggled —"*sister, Miss Darcy, who will join us at Netherfield shortly. Mr Darcy believes he will be well enough to travel to Longbourn as soon as his Mr Jones gives his opinion.*'"

I could not fathom the reason that Mr Darcy should wish to inform me of any of this, though a part of me settled to hear something of his condition. His desire to consult with his London physician and that his relations were to come to Netherfield were none of my concern. I could only suppose he wished to assure me he was recovering from the accident as well. And while I would be glad of such news for any of my acquaintances—if only because I did not like to think I was unfeeling towards anyone's injuries—it did not fit that I should also take a particular interest in the comings and goings of their family. My connexion to Mr Darcy was so trifling, it did not make sense. I was glad, of course, that Mr Darcy could have his family near him. Mine, such that had stayed to care for me, were of great comfort.

"I suppose I am glad to hear Mr Darcy will have his sister near him," I said slowly, without much understanding. I could not think that Miss Darcy, if she were as proud as her brother, would be of any comfort to him, but perhaps I am discounting the fondness one might feel for a sibling.

Papa looked at me strangely. I looked to Jane who, still clutching the letter as if it were a dear possession now, had that same look of harrowed guilt in her eyes that she had had before.

"It speaks well of him, Lizzy, that he would not wish to distress you with unexplained delays."

My brows shot up and I was astonished at my father. His words

made little sense, but what caused my surprise was the note of seriousness in his voice. He seldom spoke with such admonishment, least of all to me.

Jane sat at my side and that doleful tone was in her voice again. "Oh, Lizzy."

"Enough! I ought to take your advice and rest more, for I feel my head is slow today. I cannot help but feel as though I am missing something of import in all of this."

Jane's face showed her alarm and she looked to Papa for help. He merely studied me, as if he too felt an outsider to the topic at hand.

At last he turned to Jane and asked whether there was anything else in Mr Bingley's letter. Jane frowned at him and I agreed with her. I did not care about Mr Bingley's letter, I wished only to know why my sister looked at me with pity and concern, and why my father was receiving letters from Mr Bingley recounting Mr Darcy's plans and intentions—

All comprehension of sound stopped, and my mind became empty like the fields after a heavy snow. Nothing but white emptiness until one word kept pushing its way through to my awareness. Intentions. Intentions. Mr Darcy's intentions.

Numbly, I pushed myself down to lay flat on my back and stare at the blankness of my ceiling. I could not fathom it to be real. My heart felt skewered at the very idea. The disjointed words Jane uttered in her distress came back to me, as I realised she felt that if she perhaps had not asked Mr Bingley to stop digging for us, to wait for help, maybe they might have recovered us sooner. Why would she worry about that other than the obvious wish to see us well—except for the consequences I then faced for being entombed with a gentleman all night. With Mr Darcy.

Oh, good heavens! Mr Darcy was honour-bound to offer for me. To save my reputation. How entirely stupid I felt then for not having seen this natural result. I was expected to marry Mr Darcy. Each repetition of the astonishing statement did little to make it feel true. Panicked eyes turned towards my sister and father, and I searched for any hope that my disjointed and disquieting conclusion was false.

Jane could not meet my eyes and simply read the last of Mr Bingley's letter. "'*Mr Darcy wishes you to know, sir, that he fully intends to honour the promise made to you the day of the accident when his health allows it*'."

"Come, my Lizzy, please tell me you realised you would need to marry the gentleman."

My father's voice was strained. I could see in his face a plea for absolution, for confirmation that he had not just wounded me with information so unpleasant as to make a joke of the word. He did not

wish to have to be the bearer of bad news. I could see in the eyes of both he and Jane that they had hoped I had figured this repercussion out on my own and they would not be required to inform me of it. And indeed, I ought to have known this would be my fate. One does not spend the greater part of a day and all night in the close confines of another and hope to escape from such a consequence.

I felt incredibly dense. It was not only Miss Bingley who would gain a husband as the end result of that fateful day, but myself also.

I could not think on it now. Not with the watchful gazes of my family discerning all that was in my thoughts. I knew a revelation of this magnitude warranted solitude to work through the resulting riot of emotions. I could simply not think of it now.

With a forced smile, I turned to my relations to assure them of what was a gross falsehood. “Of course I understood that, Papa. It is considerate of Mr Darcy to keep us informed of the reasons for his delay.”

Reasons, I felt certain, included his own reluctance to the horrid obligation along with his injuries. This thought gave me the opening to further my ruse of unconcern on the topic of my matrimonial future and at once assuage the strange need to know which had haunted me that morning.

“How is Mr…the gentleman? Are his injuries serious?”

Instead of removing the worried lines from their foreheads, they deepened when I could not even utter his name. It was Jane who spoke next, in calm but careful tones.

“I do not know how to tell you this. Do remember, we have every reason to hope for a full recovery, indeed Mr Jones feels assured of it. But you see, at present…” she looked to my father but rallied her courage and returned her worried eyes to me. “At present, Mr Darcy is not in possession of his sight. The blow he received to the back of his head is the suspected reason. I do not rightly understand it, but Lizzy, the important thing is the doctor believes he will gain back the ability to see. He does not believe Mr Darcy’s blindness to be permanent.”

Another riot of thoughts, fears, and questions I would have to suppress for another time. The unreality of those minutes immediately after our rescue came back to me, and I recalled seeing Mr Darcy’s strange behaviour. It had been days since then, though, and he had not recovered his sight. I could see that my father and sister were quite distressed already, and I longed for the solitude a rest would warrant me, so I merely said, “I do recall he had a spot of trouble when we were rescued.”

“Apart from some severe megrims, which the doctor has said are common after a blow to the head and at present prevent him from travel, he is expected to recover.”

I smiled at my father for this. I did not know how to respond or what ought to be said. Certainly, I felt for the gentleman. I recalled a tenant farmer we had years ago who lost his sight after a fever and the anguishing consequences of it. I did not wish such an uncertain future on anyone. A disability of that nature, I would wager, would push Mr Darcy towards all kinds of unhappiness. He was an active sort, and if he were not to regain his sight…

No! I could not think on it.

"Yes, I am sure Mr Jones has the right of it. Mr Darcy will regain his sight soon enough, and with his London 'pheasant' coming, he will soon be set to rights."

My poor attempt at levity fell flat but received grateful smiles nevertheless for the effort. I soon convinced my sister and father I was ready and wishing for my rest. But despite my fatigue and the sluggishness of my thoughts, it was quite some time after I was left to myself—staring blankly at the wall as I lay on my side—before any form of rest could be had.

Marry Mr Darcy. And he without sight.

I could not escape the thought whether my eyes were open or closed. With stubborn determination, I resolved to invest no more concern in the matter until it was settled. As the day trip to the ruins had proved, much change can occur in only a matter of seconds.

Chapter Eight



Full of bemused distraction, my gaze travelled the length of the room and back, following the inelegant form of my cousin as he anxiously treaded the carpets. His lumbering body was accompanied by fevered, whispered words to himself, interspersed with abrupt stops where he paused to rework the sentiments he was rehearsing in his head. It was like watching an ill-favoured, inept actor practise his lines. However much entertainment Mr Collins could offer me, it was only a minor respite from my own running thoughts. At least we had reason to hope that he would have a resolution to the source of his discontent today.

Mr Bingley had written to expect him and Miss Bingley a few days ago, and each day since, some impediment had made Miss Bingley continue to postpone. The impediment, I would hazard to guess, was the man treading a path in the rug before me. However, we were told last evening by Mr Bingley—a man whose character was known for his patience, though brought to its very limit now—that Miss Bingley would have no further change of plans. Mr Bingley would arrive at Longbourn accompanied by his sister—today.

I did not wish to miss such a potentially entertaining call, and each day's delay was a blessing for me. I used it to work diligently to give my sister and father confidence in my recovery, enough to be allowed out of my chambers. Indeed, the change in scenery—if only to the parlour one floor below—was, in a way, healing.

It ought to have been Mr Collins calling on the lady. This alteration to the expected niceties was a concession to the lady, who wished to have the privilege of departing once the onerous, undesired, yet necessary declaration was accomplished.

I felt a smile threatening to emerge at the whole ridiculous scheme. Mr Collins, eager to prove his noble rank of gentleman, had been unrelenting in declaring his intentions to save the poor lady from a ruined reputation, while the ruined lady in question seemed rather reluctant to allow him. Before I could become run away with amusement at the image of superior Miss Bingley as a parson's wife—and to my cousin, no less—I was sobered by the reminder of my own looming future. I, too, would be the wife of a man I could not like, let

alone respect. For certainly, I felt the utmost gratitude for his actions in saving my life, but was gratitude enough to ensure a happy union? Morosely, I thought not. Though in honesty, I shall admit Mr Darcy was a better prospect than Mr Collins, no matter how slim the margin.

How odd that I should feel pity for Miss Bingley.

Mr Collins spied my expression on one of his turns, and in the next moment, availed himself of the open space on the sofa beside me. I reached for Jane's hand, who was on my other side; a reflex action since his sudden proximity was in equal parts disconcerting and unpleasant. Poor Miss Bingley would have to do something about getting her new husband to bathe regularly.

"Dearest Cousin Elizabeth! Do not think me unfeeling to what this change in my circumstances must mean to you! I cannot but imagine the shock of it once you were made aware."

My mouth gaped like a fish, yet there were no words. Why should I care? Other than a bout of stunned humour at the thought that those two must be joined together, I had very little invested in the matter.

"I assure you, I am content, Mr Collins."

He tilted his head and smiled sadly at me, reaching to pat my hand reassuringly. I moved it instinctively out of his reach. This only made my cousin's expression even more absurd, for he looked at me with miserable understanding in his eyes.

"Believe me, dear cousin, nothing but the obligations of a gentleman would have otherwise pulled me from furthering my suit with you." He ignored my inelegant gasp and the horrified look towards Jane. "Were it not for the need to save a worthy woman from utter ruin, I should not have abandoned you. Oh, how you must feel it!"

"Mr Colli—"

"You must see it is also my Christian duty. I cannot, in good faith, with the precepts and holy orders I have taken, do otherwise than to offer for Miss Bingley. I did not intend to compromise her, and you must know, I thought only of you while doing so."

The idea that Mr Collins would concern himself with thoughts of me while rolling entwined with Miss Bingley down a muddy hill effectively painted so amusing a picture that I drew my bottom lip between my teeth to keep from laughing.

"Mr Collins, sir. Your concern for my feelings does you justice." Jane squeezed my hand in chastisement, for while it was clear my cousin did not detect the mockery in my voice, a sister dear in heart would not be expected to miss it. "But you must not think of it again, for any future between us must be considered no more."

"Indeed! And I thank you most heartedly for your compassionate understanding. Your delicate, selfless concern does you credit as a

woman, and assures me you will not be long injured by my abandonment. I trust you will remember, if not for…but perhaps it is best we speak no more of it. Miss Bingley will arrive shortly, and I must offer her my protection."

Before I could so much as speak, to my disbelief and outrage, my cousin pressed his thick finger to my lips. "Let us say no more and keep only the memories!"

"Mr Collins!" Jane spoke out at his impropriety, while I removed his hand and wiped my face. Thankfully, our cousin stood and moved away, leaving us to gape at him and each other in astonishment that he should be so forward as to touch my person. A shiver ran through me. I may not have wished to be forced to marry Mr Darcy, but at least his touch did not send revulsion through me or upset my stomach. The reminder of Mr Darcy's touch in the tomb replaced the sensation of insects crawling under my skin, sending warm currents throughout in their place.

"Are you all right, Lizzy?" Jane whispered to me, pulling me out of the not-unpleasant memory. I could not imagine why I should think of it now.

"Yes, thank you," I said as I wiped again at my lips with my handkerchief. We both looked to our cousin with sharpness in our eyes. "How much longer must we suffer him, Jane?"

Mr Collins, unmindful of the impropriety and distress he had bestowed upon me, was again set to pacing in anticipation of our guests' arrival. He was rehearsing to himself words of the growing passion he was developing for his future bride, and I could not help but say a little prayer for the poor lady. I understood with clarity why she should wish to postpone as long as possible such an act that would secure her permanently to him. Thoughts of her unwillingness led me, naturally, to feel sorry for her brother. Mr Bingley, far from unhappy for the need to make frequent calls to Longbourn as it gave him the excuse to see my sister, was still tasked with the unpleasant business of daily persuading his sister's suitor to stay his declaration another day—for nearly a fortnight.

"I very much hope he will return to his parish as soon as the deed has been done," Jane said quietly. "He cannot be expected to be gone so long. His original plans were to leave Saturday last."

"He cannot think to stay until they are married, surely!"

Jane shook her head and lifted her shoulders. "Miss Bingley is unlikely to wish for anything less than a very long engagement."

We both turned unhappy eyes to the idiotic man in motion as we awaited the arrival of his future bride. Mr Collins was still rehearsing those sentiments he felt most likely to be pleasing to a lady.

"Whatever your feelings are for Mr Darcy, you cannot be but

relieved our cousin is no longer courting you." Although Jane whispered the words near my ear so our cousin would not hear, they nevertheless reverberated through my head like an echo. I insisted that our cousin was not a serious candidate for me, as I would never have countenanced his suit for even a minute. But neither were Mr Darcy's arrogant and prideful ways much of a prize. This bout of temper only served to disquiet Jane dreadfully. I regretted my heated, whispered rebuttal, for I could see I had wounded my sister. And truthfully, I could not seem to settle these turbulent emotions regarding Mr Darcy. The accident had shown me a side of him that ought to have softened my opinion, yet I still felt such an aversion. 'The lady doth protest too much, methinks'. The quote from Hamlet came slamming into my thoughts with as much force as the landslide. With determination, I again focused on Jane.

She had wished only to help me reconcile to my future, and her reward was to see how dreadfully unsettled I felt about it all; something I had hoped to keep hidden from her given all the blame she already placed on herself.

"Forgive me, Jane. It is only that you speak of my future marriage to that man as though it is a certainty, but I am neither betrothed nor free! I am in this unhappy flux of ambiguity with which I cannot make peace."

"But, Lizzy, you understand that you and Mr Darcy must marry. There is no other choice."

"I do understand the necessity," I pushed out through clenched teeth, "but until it is a binding and settled thing—which will not happen if he does not make his offer—I cannot make myself try to reconcile a future with Mr Darcy."

"He will come when he is able, Lizzy. You only just recovered enough a few days ago to venture out of your chambers. You must expect he also needs to heal."

I groaned quietly. I was not angered with Mr Darcy for not calling and saying those undesirable words to begin our betrothal; rather, I dreaded it perhaps just as much as Miss Bingley must in awaiting my cousin's address. However, at the same time, I could not feel calm about the wait. We knew that he was waiting to be seen by his London physician and still plagued with a loss of sight. While I had concerns for his well-being, of course, I could not describe the source of my disquiet. I was neither betrothed nor free, and thus my mind could not process or imagine a life with Mr Darcy in earnest.

"I am in no hurry to see Mr Darcy." Seeing Jane's brows furrow further, I was quick to finish my thought. "Though I shall admit, until all is settled, I cannot feel calm. What if he should cry off and leave me, and indeed all my sisters, ruined? Calm yourself, Jane. I can see

you mean to argue with me over this. I know you believe him to be honourable and good—if only because of his friendship with Mr Bingley—but what can we even know of him?"

"Lizzy—"

What more my sister might have said in his defence was cut off by a piercing outburst from Mr Collins as he rushed from the room. A quick look out the window confirmed the reason for his fevered leave-taking, for Mr Bingley's carriage was seen pulling into the drive.

"Fear not, dearest sister. I shall, in time, make peace with whatever my future will be. You need not worry for me on this. I am not made for low spirits, and whatever Mr Darcy does or does not do will not have the power to steal my happiness for long."

I saw the turmoil in Jane's features and knew she wished to say more. However, the time was not right.

"I would wish only that you not become decided against Mr Darcy at this point, Lizzy. It would do you little good to begin your future life knowing nothing of real value about your husband."

Of course she was correct in this, and her gentle rebuke, so rarely given from such a sweet-tempered person as she, was all the more lasting in its sting to my heart. I did not wish to think I was, by nature, unfeeling or unfairly prejudiced. If Mr Darcy did honour his plans to redeem my reputation, it would not serve me well to set about hating him for all eternity. It was all just a hopeless mess.

~

The heated glare sent my way by Miss Bingley was nothing short of pure loathing. I imagined, added to the indignity of having to marry my cousin, it was the sting of having her favourite stolen right out from under her by a woman she considered of such inferior connexions. Miss Bingley was always quick to forget that although her brother was educated as a gentleman, she was still the daughter of a tradesman, whereas I was not. Even though everyone considered my marriage to Mr Darcy to be as certain as the marriage between Mr Collins and Miss Bingley, I would not allow that lady to know my doubts on the matter, nor my displeasure. Let her believe I was happy with the outcome. I had never detected any particular regard for her from Mr Darcy. Indeed, he rather seemed to avoid her or put off her attempts at allurement.

We were all sitting together most awkwardly in the morning room. Mr Collins had an unusual look of fascination focused on Miss Bingley, causing him to be uncharacteristically silent. His quiet was matched by the others, and other than Jane's ringing for tea, little was said beyond the initial insincere enquires as to health. Given this was the

first instance where the entire party except Mr Darcy had been in company together since the accident at Bodden Chapel, it was no great surprise that everyone was reluctant to broach the reason for the visit.

All except Mr Collins, of course, who now and then would begin to suggest a private audience with Miss Bingley, only to have that lady change the direction of her glare to him or raise a hand to gesture he cease speaking. Much to my surprise—for I had never known anything or anyone to have the power to silence Mr Collins—the gestures and glares produced the desired effect, and the man was made soundless.

However, such an untenable situation could not go on forever, and after several pointed looks and one or two directed clearings of Mr Bingley's throat, Miss Bingley sighed heavily and reluctantly looked to my cousin.

Mr Collins's eyes glowed with a strange happiness at her nod, and he was quick to then ask Mr Bingley whether he might accompany Miss Bingley outside to walk in the garden. Permission was granted, Mr Bingley eyeing his sister with a stern brow as he wished them a pleasant walk. The two left the room. Mr Collins reaching for Miss Bingley's arm, and that lady's less-than-subtle movement to prevent him was the last the rest of the party saw as the couple slipped through the French doors into the garden.

Those of us remaining were no more able than before to engage in conversation after Mr Collins and Miss Bingley departed, as all our minds were preoccupied with what was happening outside. For myself, I was imagining what humiliations and absurdities a lady might be subjected to when a man like Mr Collins proposed. His manner was neither humble nor proud, but a strange mix of pompous superiority and servile superciliousness.

Jane nudged me with her elbow and gave me a pointed look. I could not imagine what she wished for me to say; Mr Bingley was *her* suitor. At my confusion, she sighed and turned to the gentleman.

"How is Mr Darcy? Is he much recovered?"

Mr Bingley's features were transformed into the gentle expression he reserved only for my sister, writ with approval and admiration. "I thank you for asking. Mr Darcy, as you know, was hit quite forcefully, presumably by a rock, on the back of the head. While the rest of his body was, thankfully, largely unscathed aside from some bruises and minor cuts, it is the blow to the head that still troubles him. And then, of course, there is the troubling…situation…with his eyesight…"

We were all quiet for a time. Of all the outcomes of that day, a man's loss of sight was nothing short of tragic, no matter his identity. I understood then why Jane had nudged me. Naturally, she thought that as his future bride, I ought to be the one to ask after his well-

being. And I suppose she was correct. For the second time this morning, I was humbled by my sister's gentle rebuke.

"I am sorry to hear he still suffers," I ventured lamely.

Mr Bingley granted me kind eyes, unassuming and free of any suspicion that my words were anything but entirely sincere with regard to his friend.

"Fear not, Miss Elizabeth. Were it not for the severe megrims he suffers daily, he would have accompanied me on today's visit. He is made most unhappy at Netherfield. The doctors will not allow him to travel even such a short distance until his head aches less. Indeed, it is his physician that believes the blow may have caused swelling in his brain, thus the headaches and blindness. The jostling of a carriage would, I fear, exacerbate the condition. Everyone is hopeful that with constant rest, the use of headache powders, and time, he will recover his sight as well."

I could hear what he did not say: that although there was hope, there was enough uncertainty to cause much distress to everyone. Mr Bingley managed to rouse my compassion for his friend. I had suffered from debilitating megrims in the past, and I could not wish anyone to have to endure them. I could not imagine what added torture a life without sight would be.

"Are they frequent then? Does he suffer terribly?"

Jane smiled her approval at the obvious sympathy in my voice. Like so many other feelings since being rescued, I could not seem to settle on one particular sentiment. At times I was adamant that Mr Darcy would not honour his word to ask for my hand, then at others, I was certain he would, if only to not appear dishonourable. I was full of dislike for the gentleman one moment and then reminded of his gentle caring during our entrapment the next. At no time during our night together had Mr Darcy acted anything but considerate and solicitous of me. His gentleness had swept over me like a warm blanket, calming me, and it seemed the memory alone had that power still. My breast squeezed with an unfamiliar jolt of pain to think of his suffering now. He had saved my life, and I still could not like him. What type of horrid creature was I? I had never imagined it possible for a person, let alone myself, to be so selfish. It was a loathsome character trait within me that, despite acknowledging Mr Darcy's suffering to be acute, allowed me to push it aside to assuage my own sentiments. I disliked my feelings being so disordered and unfamiliar. I was in constant flux.

"I have never seen the like, Miss Elizabeth. I am sorry to say so, and perhaps I shall only bring you more distress in telling you, but my friend does not conceal the discomfort he is experiencing in mind and body as well as he imagines."

“I am sorry to hear that,” I said quietly, having a difficult time imagining a man such as Mr Darcy weakened in any sense. He was much too powerful a gentleman, much too strong. My cheeks pinked suddenly as I recalled just how strong his shoulders felt under my hands in the dark.

“If it is acceptable to you, Miss Elizabeth, might I send word of your recovery to my friend? He has been most eager to hear news of you. Indeed, he plagues me almost daily to know how you fare.” Mr Bingley chuckled good-naturedly.

I was stunned to hear this. It did not sit well with me to know that he had asked about me when I had not much bothered to ask after him. That despite his own bodily discomfort—his pain which, if Mr Bingley was not exaggerating, must be extreme—Mr Darcy was anxious for me. That his concern was so severe as to ‘plague’ his friend for news of me settled into my thoughts like a pin prick. I could not decide why it troubled me; it ought to have called forth my appreciation. I was not angered by the revelation—quite the opposite—but in and of itself, it was a source of disquiet.

“You may tell Mr Darcy that my sister is recovering quite well. The doctor advised that she not take any carriage rides for a little while longer nor venture farther than the gardens for another two weeks; however, beyond this, she is expected to recover fully.”

Again, I was ashamed that my thoughts prevented me from answering for myself and that Jane was obliged to perform the duty. I silently thanked her with a squeeze of her hand and turned to Mr Bingley.

“Please tell Mr Darcy I am grateful for his concern.” I was surprised to realise that I meant every word.

“I assure you, he will be most pleased to hear it.” Mr Bingley smiled his pleasure.

“That is quite unnecessary, Mr Collins, I assure you!”

Startled, we all turned towards the doors where Miss Bingley’s outraged voice could be heard long before she opened them with a flourish and stepped quickly into the room. A pink-faced Mr Collins followed in her wake. She turned to her brother, chin held high, her complexion flushed, and spoke in regal tones.

“I am ready to take my leave, Brother. I am becoming fatigued.”

Mr Bingley stood immediately and frowned at his sister, a clear question in his tone. “Caroline…?”

Miss Bingley growled through a clenched jaw, “The purpose of our visit has been accomplished.”

Immediately, we all turned towards Mr Collins. I was amused to see my cousin looking at Miss Bingley with adoration despite the abrupt way she ended their walk. Furthering my amusement, and to

my surprise, he appeared to be truly captivated by the lady. Could Mr Collins actually be attracted to such an overbearing lady, one more apt to demean than compliment a person? From my observation, it looked as though that was the case. I wondered immediately who would garner the greater share of Mr Collins's devotion now—his future wife or Lady Catherine de Bourgh? By all accounts, the great lady was not terribly unlike Miss Bingley in her air and manners.

Mr Collins babbled on, and I owed him a measure of gratitude for it, as it prevented me from releasing an unwelcome bout of laughter.

"Mr Bingley, your lovely sister has granted me my fondest wish this day and agreed to marry me."

Miss Bingley flushed deeper but kept her chin high, no indication of her feelings showing beyond her wish to depart.

After hasty congratulations to the pair were presented all around, Miss Bingley turned to her brother and, with eyes burning with anger, was finally successful in her wish to take their leave. Mr Bingley reluctantly said his farewells to myself and Jane and took his sister by the arm to escort her out. Mr Collins followed eagerly behind, speaking compliments and well wishes for when next they met.

As soon as the doors closed, I stood abruptly, forgetting my injury for a moment in my haste to watch through the window as the three of them reached the carriage. My ill-thought actions only produced a minor stabbing, and for that I was grateful.

The reward proved greater than the discomfort. The scene without was more entertaining—and a little perplexing—than I could have imagined. Mr Collins insisted on handing up his betrothed, and after a slight pause and a warning glance to his sister, Mr Bingley accepted and entered the carriage before her. While I could not hear any words spoken between the newly engaged couple, I could clearly see that Miss Bingley did not appreciate the gesture of affection Mr Collins bestowed on the back of her hand. Curiously, although she did speak a protest against his actions, she was silent as he whispered something in her ear, her complexion turning a ruddy red. Miss Bingley eyed Mr Collins with a stone-faced look and then, after a minute, tipped her head slightly.

Whatever Mr Collins had said and she acknowledged must forever be a mystery. I did not want to know what might cause her to calmly allow Mr Collins's second gesture of affection placed upon the back of her hand. I certainly could not imagine what speech was capable of causing the small flash of a smile I saw on her face as my cousin assisted her into the carriage. Indeed, it was so unfathomable an expression, I was sure I imagined it.

Chapter Nine



The cool crispness of the morning was beginning to give way to what promised to be a bright, warm day. Given the capriciousness of the weather at this time of year, I was grateful for any day that might be dry enough to afford me some pleasures out of doors. Although I could not yet convince my family or Mr Jones that I was well enough to venture beyond our small gardens, this little wilderness of foliage was sufficient for now to work its magic over my senses. The restless, caged animal that resided inside my body during my long recovery settled some at the feel of the breeze kissing my cheeks. My companion was speaking of her wish to press some of the rose petals before they lost their bloom to the frost.

"Smell this, Lizzy, is it not lovely?"

Jane pressed a small rosebud clipping into my ungloved hands as she turned to find another among the bush. I obliged, my senses filling with the sweet distinctive aroma. With my exhale, I felt a little more tension roll off my shoulders.

"Jane, you ought to hang this one. It might do well for a shoe flower, or in your hair, when next you are able to dance with Mr Bingley."

My sister looked at me with mock rebuke, laughing lightly at my teasing. The gentleman was never long from the house, and indeed, I fully expected he would call again that day. Now that his sister's betrothal was secured, and her reputation with it, I wondered why he did not speak for himself when it came to my sister.

As we continued along the garden path, stopping now and then for Jane to select a clipping for her basket, I asked, "Has he given you any indication as to his feelings?"

Her natural loveliness was enhanced by the warm hue of her cheeks, matching the blush of the rose she held in her hands.

"I…well, I cannot be certain. When can a lady ever really know a gentleman's heart? But I do believe…he cares for me."

Impulsively, I wrapped my arms around my sister and embraced her fiercely as I chuckled softly between us. I was momentarily delayed in my response by the thought that my actions brought only the slightest of twinges to my ribs, and it pleased me to have this little

proof of my recovery.

“Of course he does, Jane! For a man like Mr Bingley, it is more a matter of trying not to read his feelings, as he displays them for all to see in his expressions. He loves you; his eyes tell it plainly.”

Jane’s eyes became bright, and with a smile, she modestly turned to inspect another bloom rather than admit that my words affected her.

“Why do you think he does not declare himself?” I asked hesitantly, not wishing to remove the contentment brimming upon my sister’s face. I wondered how she could be so serene with his constant attentions but no formal declaration. Certainly, Mr Bingley was open in his admiration, which ought to be comfort enough, but it had been several weeks since he first began showing a preference for my sister, and I wondered what held him back. My thoughts turned darker as it occurred to me that perhaps his friend would have an opinion and it was likely Mr Bingley would seek it. Mr Darcy had yet to speak his own words to uphold his honour with me, though little I anticipated them as my sister did with his friend. The more reasonable side of me knew that he would, that his excuses for delay had been valid. Added to this was the fact that neither of us wished to rush to the altar, but I could not help resenting Mr Darcy’s delay as it seemed to mirror the hesitation that Mr Bingley displayed. It could not be coincidence.

When Jane spoke, I forced myself to remove the creases between my brows so she could not read my thoughts as readily as she usually was able to.

She spoke softly; her voice had something more than contentment, it carried with it an undercurrent of confidence that had me studying her beautiful features.

“Now that his sister is not a worry, I have reason to believe he only hesitates in declaring himself because of his friend.”

My jaw became rigid, and I felt it might break in two, so tightly I was pressing my teeth together. So Mr Darcy *was* behind his friend’s delay. I suspected as much, yet along with my anger came disappointment. Why could he not allow his friend to marry for love? Someone, after this whole mess of an affair, ought to be able to. It was not as though he and I had that luxury.

“He has hinted that his friend’s recovery is his primary focus at present.” Jane’s cheeks pinked further, but she looked me in the eye as she changed her voice to a lower octave, presumably quoting her Mr Bingley. “In due time, I very much hope other essential matters might take precedence.”

Her lips quirked and soon gave way to a delighted smile, one I could not deny affected me. My own features mimicked hers, and once again I embraced my sister, a smile upon my lips. Her happiness—and

indeed this subtle hint given by Mr Bingley of his hopes—was all that was required for me to set aside my concerns in this matter. I never claimed to have a perfect understanding of all things, nor have the humility with which others might be blessed, so I did not dwell long upon my hasty judgment of Mr Darcy and his influence on Mr Bingley. After all, it was not an unreasonable assumption, and what proof had I that Mr Darcy had *not* spoken against Jane to Mr Bingley? No, instead I allowed her happiness to ease my conscience and push away those unpleasant thoughts.

"Has Miss Bingley conceded to setting a date for her wedding?"

Jane looked to me and held back a smile. "She has not, as you no doubt might guess. And as a result, Mr Collins has informed me he will be spending the day in the back parlour writing to his patroness to inform her of his betrothal and asking for permission to extend his stay until the nuptials. He is not to be disturbed."

"What, the whole day to write a letter? I suppose it would take that long, for our cousin never uses less than ten words when two will suffice. Or in this case, three: 'I shall marry.'"

Jane laughed. "No doubt it will take him many revisions. He may be excused, for his absence is no loss to us."

"Brava. I believe that is the most unforgiving statement you have ever made."

It was wonderful to spend time with Jane in this manner, our spirits light, enjoying the garden. I looked at my sister and thought she had never looked so lovely.

It was a good thing too, for quickly we both turned at the sound of carriage wheels on the gravel drive. I squeezed Jane's arm, pleased for her that Mr Bingley was such a loyal suitor. She turned to me then with excitement bubbling in her eyes, a grin marking her lips. I loved to see her so animated since usually Jane hid her feelings with those outside our family behind proper serenity. I had no such talent for hiding my thoughts, and it had often been to my detriment.

"He has come at last. Oh, Lizzy, look at you!" She began brushing at my hair, tucking in an errant curl at my temple. Her eyes quickly assessed my dress, adjusting my sleeve and pulling my shawl up about my shoulders, and paused to evaluate the rest, her lips pressed in contemplation.

I laughed, reaching to still her hands. "Jane, he does not come for me. It matters little how well I look. You are his 'essential matter,' and you look radiant and lovely."

She tipped her head slightly and met my eyes. Finally her questioning expression cleared, and she smiled as she patted my cheeks with both hands.

"Lizzy, that is not Mr Bingley's carriage. The crest on that one is

Mr Darcy's. And he most certainly is not coming to call upon me."

It was just as well that she then pinched my cheeks—like our mother might!—for I felt the blood drain from my face, and at once I was filled with nervous energy. He has come? He has come! My heart lurched at the thought of seeing Mr Darcy for the first time since we were trapped together in the rubble of Bodden Chapel. I could not be at peace then, as quite unexpectedly, my mind was bombarded with memories of his voice in the calm blackness. The timbre and accent, so clear in my mind, and his cadence of speech, unique to him, pushed all rational thought aside. I was wholly gone from the garden and once again in the black vault we shared. His hands—I could almost feel his hands pressing against my ribs, holding me together. I wish I had something to hold me together now, for how was I to appear even the least bit calm when I saw him again? Why had I even once complained of his delay? Now that it was upon me, the very notion of seeing him again for the first time since that day wracked my soul with a mixture of panic and need such as I had never before experienced nor could have anticipated.

I dared not think of his purpose in coming. We all knew why, and it was terrifying in the extreme, with the power to disturb the emotions already cascading through my veins.

It was Jane's fingers taking the rosebud from my numb fingertips and placing it in my hair near my ear that pulled me crashing back to the present—and away from phantom strong arms that had the ability to both disquiet and give comfort.

By the time the carriage rolled to a stop and the impressively-matched, chestnut horses stilled by the groom, I was certain there would be no need for Jane to bring colour to my cheeks with further pinches. Indeed, before the door could be opened and the step let down, I felt the warm evidence of a blush in full force on my cheeks.

By this time, we had left the garden path and met the emerging guests at their carriage. Mr Bingley descended first, a resplendent smile stretched across his features. There was no attempt on his part to adopt a more proper mien as he bowed low at the waist and spoke his greetings.

I squeezed Jane's arm, which was looped through mine. Mr Bingley's obvious delight in calling on us this morning brought a measure of harmony to the moment, and my thoughts settled despite seeing, from the corner of my eye, another gentleman descend. Resolutely, I kept my gaze upon Mr Bingley as we curtseyed and gave our welcome in response to his enthusiastic greetings.

Perhaps my mind was not as steady as I had thought, for I was taken by surprise when I looked to see the second gentleman was both a soldier and a stranger to me. His easy, open expression was quick to

help me overcome my astonishment. He did not hesitate to turn and hand down a young lady from the carriage.

I studied her while half listening to the warm enquiries as to health being exchanged between my sister and Mr Bingley. The young woman was dressed quite fashionably, her gown costly yet subdued in a way that was very becoming. At first I could not see her face, for she kept it focused on the gravel drive. Her companion, his regimental red coat pressed to perfection, whispered words to her ear, earning a slight nod as he led her a step or two away from the carriage. My eyes followed this womanly girl, who seemed too young for her beautiful features. Although she did not raise her head farther than the hem of my gown, I could see the delicate curve of her jaw, finely shaped lips, and golden curls.

Made unusually self-conscious by this elegant being, I wished I had not the ready habit of walking about in poor conditions, for the hem of my gown, while not muddied as was oft the case, was still fully damp from the wet grass around the garden.

My fixation with the unknown lady's elegance was quickly dispatched by the firm tones coming from inside the carriage. I knew those tones even though I could not hear the exact words being spoken to the soldier standing at the door. That voice could only belong to Mr Darcy, and with no accounting for it, I felt all the ground I had gained in settling my thoughts was lost in an instant. Blinking, I tried desperately to regulate myself. There was absolutely no reason the sound of Mr Darcy's voice ought to have this effect on me. Although it was a harrowing event we had both endured, and despite the plaguing dreams of this gentleman that still afflicted me, he was not some divine being with bewitching powers. *Be reasonable, Elizabeth!* I told myself, even as I tried to remember the distasteful future we both had in store. Somehow, the thought of being married to Mr Darcy was not as effective as it usually was at lowering my spirits. Blast that voice of his!

He was speaking again to the soldier whose hand was stretched forth within the carriage. Curiosity led me to unconsciously step closer. There seemed to be some dispute, but soon it was resolved, and I witnessed the unnatural scene of Mr Darcy taking the military gentleman's hand and stepping out into the late morning sun. His movements were graceful, yet at the same time hesitant, in a way I had never seen with Mr Darcy.

When he unbent himself, standing firmly on the ground, he quickly released the other man's hand and adjusted his clothing, smoothing lines in his vest and great coat. My eyes involuntarily scanned up to his face, and I studied his familiar features as a jolt ran up my spine: the patrician nose—straight and slightly turned up—the usual press of

his lips in discontent, and his jawline held firm. Nothing seemed altered from the close inspection I had been afforded when the light of day seeped into our enclosed space at the ruins, yet I could not help the sigh of relief that escaped at proof he was well—though I stifled it as best I could. When at last I allowed my eyes to settle on his, it was accompanied by a sinking sensation. Looking at Mr Darcy, it was easy to confirm that the dazed uncertainty that marred his usually focused glare the last time I had put eyes on him was still there.

For an unfathomable minute, I allowed myself to forget. But perhaps it was not really forgetfulness but a wilful denial. I was naturally hesitant to feel the disquiet, the concerning unanswered questions that came with acknowledging the truth. I had somehow begun to think that Mr Darcy's coming today was indication he was recovered. That he was not…

Faced with the truth before my eyes, I could not describe the feelings that hammered down upon me. Mr Darcy was whole in body, his limbs and face no longer bore evidence of the scrapes and bruises that once disturbed them. But he had not yet recovered his sight. I could not fully contemplate all the facets of this news before the two strangers stood before us, the lady's arm gently guiding Mr Darcy forward.

"Welcome, Mr Darcy, it is good to see…to know you are well." Jane winced, the awkward phrasing causing her to blush, mortified. It was such a hopeless, strange situation.

Immediately, I came to her rescue and spoke up to cover her embarrassment. "Indeed, sir. We are pleased to welcome you to Longbourn, as it is evidence of your health."

Mr Darcy, who had been looking in our general direction, snapped his eyes at me. It startled me; it was almost as if he could see me even though I knew that was not the case. I had never before felt my voice to be distinct, yet the gentleman honed into it as if it gave him sight! His features softened slightly, enough for me to know that I had removed from him some of the empty picture his world was now.

"And your guests are welcome too," I continued, my voice slightly strangled.

My reminder awakened Mr Darcy to his duty, and for the first time in weeks, I heard his voice spoken directly to me.

"Might I have the privilege of introducing to you my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy, and my cousin Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam?"

He gestured to his sister, who was still carefully clasping his arm. His cousin tapped his shoulder with easy camaraderie, an action cleverly done to allow Mr Darcy to know where the colonel stood while preventing any embarrassment. Mr Darcy's expression softened slightly in thanks, and he lifted his arm in the approximate direction

of his cousin.

"And these are our neighbours and friends, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn."

Why did it disquiet me to hear him speak so warmly of us? If asked, I would hardly have called him a friend. The generosity in his introduction was yet another unsettling question that lingered, like fog in my brain. Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped forward and gracefully bowed. He had a knowing look in his eyes when they met mine. In them, I could see both wonder and concern, coloured with a measure of misgiving. It was not enough, though, to prevent me from liking him immediately.

He had the easy manners that his cousin did not, and a way of speaking that told of his amiable nature and pleasant demeanour. It was evident to me that he and his cousin were close, given the puckering of his brows that creeped into his happy features whenever he turned to Mr Darcy to include him in the conversation. *That* man did not speak much, but I felt he was listening intently to any words I spoke, however inconsequential. It was disconcerting, to say the least. I felt Mr Darcy was drinking every word from the cup of my lips and living off the life source. It made me uncommonly stupid in my conversation. I was ridiculously flattered in a way that did not make sense and, at the same time, agonisingly self-conscious that his focused attention was ill-placed.

With awkward, poor grace that I had never before felt in company —for I had always prided myself on my ease among anyone, be it stranger or friend—I began to draw out Miss Darcy. She had pulled her brother nearer to me as she moved closer, a fact that did not go unnoticed.

"I am happy to make your acquaintance, Miss Darcy. I have often heard your praise."

It was the wrong thing to say, and I knew it immediately. She was quite obviously and painfully shy, and I had heaped upon her shoulders an expectation that looked to burden her small frame. Mr Darcy rested his hand upon his sister's on his arm and rubbed it reassuringly. I blinked, for I recalled when he had utilised a similar gesture on me.

"I do hope you will feel welcome here. Longbourn has many beautiful attractions."

Colonel Fitzwilliam smiled at my attempts to ease his cousin, and with careful and gentle efforts, I was able to pull from Miss Darcy one or two words now and then. I felt for the girl. I remembered that the only close family she had was her brother, and he could not have been much of a source for confidence, for Mr Darcy owned all the confidence in a room when he was present. Well, perhaps such was

not the case any more. The thought troubled me in a way that it should not have. He was naturally too proud. Wouldn't anything that capped that pride be a good thing?

Chapter Ten



Gratefully, Jane's manners were not bound in any way, and she invited the party to walk in the gardens with us. Of course we could not stand around speaking in the drive for the entire visit. When did I become so inept? For a moment, I felt my heart rate surge as the party naturally separated into pairs. Jane and Mr Bingley began walking down one path, and I suspected that Colonel Fitzwilliam would replace his cousin in escorting Miss Darcy, leaving me with her brother.

I prepared myself for it. There was an unspoken purpose to this visit that went well beyond the pleasantries exchanged near the carriage. I was not ready for it despite knowing for many weeks that this time was coming. I understood its necessity and was grateful that Mr Darcy seemed intent upon fulfilling his obligation, yet I had the impulse to run off down the lane and hide in the lilac bushes there. A wry smile lifted my lips as I thought of crouching down among the branches as a child when my mother would call me inside.

However, it was Colonel Fitzwilliam's arm that was presented to me, his keen eyes questioning my secret smile as he offered his escort.

I tipped my head and accepted, placing my hand on his arm. Ahead of us, Miss Darcy and her brother were carefully making their way along the path. She made subtle gestures, spoke whispered words, and by so doing, allowed her brother to have all the appearance of leading her, while in truth she guided him. It was a kindness that spoke of her affection for her brother and her understanding of how he would not wish to look helpless. How unsettling it must be for Mr Darcy to require such gentle measures, and I felt gratitude for his cousin and sister who so expertly disguised their help that anyone not aware of his condition might not otherwise have guessed he could not see.

I felt the colonel's eyes on me and realised I had been studying the backs of Miss Darcy and her brother with focused attention for far too long. He smiled slightly at me, and I noticed the suspicion leave his eyes.

"May I speak plainly, Miss Elizabeth?"

I schooled my features to remain impassive, difficult though it was

for me to do so. How I wished I had Jane's ability to always look serene!

"Yes, of course, sir."

He hesitated only a moment, looking ahead to our companions, and I felt our pace slow ever so slightly. "As you can imagine, the news of the collapse and my cousin's injury was a shock to us. I could hardly make out the words in Mr Bingley's letter, which only added to the concern in receiving it."

I laughed quietly. The topic was not humorous, but I recalled the difficulty Jane had had in reading her suitor's handwriting and imagined Colonel Fitzwilliam likewise found it so. I sobered immediately, concerned lest my companion misinterpret my bout of amusement.

He did not, to my relief. "You are familiar with Mr Bingley's hand, I see." I nodded, embarrassment flooding my cheeks with colour for being so light-hearted when he had wished to speak of his cousin's condition. He thankfully continued.

"Mr Darcy is…I beg your pardon, perhaps I should ask how well acquainted you are with my cousin? He introduced you as a friend, but I know he has not been long in the neighbourhood."

This was more familiar ground and I answered honestly, pitching my voice low to keep it from carrying to the couple ahead of us. I looked around for my sister and her companion, surprised I could not see them right away.

"Indeed, you are correct. Mr Bingley let the house just after Michaelmas, and I believe your cousin followed soon thereafter. We have dined in company a number of times, and more recently, I spent a few days under the same roof as Mr Darcy when my sister became ill while on a visit to Miss Bingley. Excepting attending an assembly together…"

Colonel Fitzwilliam was an astute observer, and I wished I had been more careful with my tone when recalling the assembly, for his eyebrows popped up though he did not speak. I suspected he filed my words away for another time.

I cleared my throat and continued, explaining that besides those occasions we had very little interaction. "Until, that is, the day of the visit to Bodden Chapel."

Once again I regretted my transparency. Despite the physical and emotional distress of that day, for some inexplicable reason, my voice carried a measure of reverence when speaking of it, and the observant colonel did not miss it. To avoid his interested gaze, I looked ahead and my eyes locked on the broad back of Mr Darcy as he bent down to speak something to his sister.

"I was sorry to hear of your injuries, Miss Elizabeth. My cousin and

Mr Bingley explained the extent of them, and I am pleased that I am able to make your acquaintance without you appearing to suffer much for them."

I thanked him, and for a moment we were silent.

"I have wondered about my cousin's actions." At my questioning glance, he was quick to add, "That is not to say I was surprised he would jump to the rescue of a handsome woman, mind you."

I blushed at his compliment and then my lips quirked up into a smile. I suspected Mr Darcy had not informed his cousin that my beauty he had long withstood. No, whatever reason propelled him to rescue me, it was not my attractiveness.

Once again the keen observance of my companion detected something of my thoughts. With humour, I spoke with perhaps more impertinence than I ought to have done on such short acquaintance.

"I am loath to contradict you, Colonel, given the newness of our association. I would hate to damage so new a friendship by challenging your assumption, yet I cannot allow you to go on with such faulty logic."

Colonel Fitzwilliam proved himself the amiable gentleman I had suspected of him when he laughed outright, bringing forth my own laughter. Mr Darcy turned abruptly to look over his shoulder towards the sound, and the frown upon his face was quite familiar. It only added to the evidence of how wrong his cousin was in assuming Mr Darcy would have used my outward appearance as an inducement to come to my aid during the collapse. Romantic as that sounded, it was clear to me that Mr Darcy acted on impulse when he saw danger to another, and that was all.

I tempered my laughter, not wishing to draw him into my conversation with his cousin before I could make my correction. Colonel Fitzwilliam seemed all the more amused by his cousin's fierce grimace and slowed our pace even more. Mr Darcy, at the mercy of his guide, was obliged to keep walking.

"Please explain yourself, Miss Elizabeth. I am eager to hear your opinion and promise that contradicting me will not alter mine. But be quick about it, mind you. My cousin clearly dislikes that I have been the recipient of your charming laugh. I must warn you, I have known of your many qualities long before we met this day."

He nodded towards his cousin when he spoke the last, and I was surprised by it. He could not have meant that Mr Darcy spoke highly of me. Ahead of Mr and Miss Darcy, I caught a glimpse of my sister and Mr Bingley as they passed behind a break in a hedge. That settled my thoughts and answered for such a strange utterance. Mr Bingley, I had no doubt, was the type of gentleman to speak highly of everyone he met.

“As kind as you are to say that Mr Darcy acted as he did at Bodden Chapel on account of my beauty, I must sadly inform you that I am certain that is not the case. Being his cousin, you must know he would have acted as any gentleman might in the face of danger. Whatever else may have been his motive is his to explain. For you see, I have long known Mr Darcy’s opinion on the subject of my beauty. I assure you, I am merely ‘tolerable’ and ‘not handsome enough’ to tempt him.”

I laughed lightly at my wit and use of Mr Darcy’s own words from the assembly. I even flattered myself to think I did a tolerable job at mimicking Mr Darcy’s baritone voice. The sting of those words had been long dispelled, though perhaps not entirely and without leaving their mark. Of course a lady wishes to be thought of as beautiful; however, that does not mean that she cannot appreciate a noble gesture for what it was. Mr Darcy had not rescued me for my beauty as the colonel suggested, but because he was a man of action. And begrudgingly, I allowed myself to admit it was because of some measure of goodness within him.

“Is that so? How very interesting.” My companion spoke as though he did not believe a word I had said yet had garnered some valuable information from my speech. He left me feeling a little adrift.

“I hope my cousin was not foolish enough to actually speak those words aloud; however, your amusing impression of him confirms it. A thousand pardons to you, miss. I do not know the particulars that led him to make such a false statement; my cousin loathes deceit of any kind. Perhaps he was misheard.”

“I assure you, Colonel, I know of what I speak. I heard Mr Darcy say these words myself.”

“Well, let us not quarrel, shall we?” he responded with a beguiling smile, causing me return it. “We have only just met, Miss Elizabeth, and I do not wish to be on enemy lines with you. Let me just say, I too have heard my cousin speak on this subject, and I shall maintain my previous opinion.”

My mouth dropped open in an unladylike expression, which I soon schooled. Colonel Fitzwilliam merely smiled to himself, full of some amusing secret he was unlikely to share. Given his acute observance of me during our short acquaintance, as well as his ability to confuse and spin my thoughts in all manner of directions, I had no doubt he had risen to the rank of colonel with no trouble at all. I pitied any foe he might face. For certainly, this man would know their secrets and strip them of any strategic order to their battle plans with very little effort.

Although the colonel had the ability to unnerve me, I found his companionship easy in another way. Oddly, even though we had just met, I felt the same sort of fondness touched with a bit of annoyance

that I had always presumed a sister might feel for a brother.

We did not speak more, which was a blessing as it allowed me time to reconsider many different assumptions I had made about my companion as well as his cousin. That man and Miss Darcy slowed to allow us to catch them, and soon we four were standing about quietly and not a little awkwardly. Colonel Fitzwilliam led me to a nearby iron bench, charmingly set by a cluster of late-blooming rose bushes. I sat with a thank you and expected he would next escort Miss Darcy to take the seat by my side.

Instead, he startled me with his words to his cousin. “Darcy, might we exchange companions for a time? There is a flower I see just over there that I do believe can also be found in Pemberley’s gardens, and I wonder whether Georgiana might oblige me and identify it.”

“Of course.”

Mr Darcy’s face was as impassive as ever I had seen it. He was unlikely to give much of his thoughts away to the colonel, yet it seemed as though that military strategist knew them regardless. Miss Darcy walked her brother to me and took his hand in hers for an affectionate parting squeeze.

Had I not known of the subtle ways his relations helped him, I might not have noticed how Miss Darcy left her brother’s hand on the edge of the bench when she let it go. This little action allowed Mr Darcy to take a seat without much disruption to his natural grace had his vision been sound. A lump formed in my throat. Although the bench had ample space for both of us, I attest I could feel the heat of his leg as it rested next to mine despite the several inches that separated us.

I missed the parting words and looks from the colonel and Miss Darcy. Which was just as well, for I could imagine what they might have communicated. I was not ignorant of the real purpose of exchanging walking partners. Mr Darcy had come to Longbourn for one reason and one reason alone. It would seem it was time.

Nervously, I looked up through my lashes at the stillness beside me. And Mr Darcy did sit almost too still, as if he were lost in a state within himself. The gentleman, for all his ability to hide his thoughts, could not hide the subtle movements of his eyes as they darted around tensely, nor hide the way he repeatedly swallowed, clearing his throat a number of times before attempting to speak.

I knew that I was staring and I ought not. However well I knew my breach with etiquette at that moment, I could not fight my inclination to drink in every aspect of his features. At no other time during our acquaintance was I afforded such an opportunity to study him without his knowledge. As much as I disliked his manners, I could never fully inoculate myself against his handsome features. As if he could detect

my thoughts, even though I had not spoken a word, Mr Darcy turned towards me. His lost and blank eyes hit me with a blast of unexpected grief. I could almost say that I missed the focused way he used to look at me. It was a shame that someone of his proud demeanour should lose this aspect of his being. Mr Darcy ought to always have his ability to glare. Without it, he looked almost…wrong.

At least when he glared at me, I knew where we stood with one another. He looked at me to find fault, and I was, if not pleased, then used to it. This lack of focus caused by his blindness had the ability to undermine my dislike for him. It humanised him, and made me think all manner of ridiculous thoughts, such as how I wished to push away the curl at his brow or run my finger along the fullness of his lower lip. And that was just the unsettling thoughts regarding his handsome face. I almost prayed for the return of his sight if only to have that glare of his remind me how his pride and arrogance dictated his every action. The last time he had glared at me had been just before he leapt at me near the ruins.

I recalled with vivid acuity the force of that look. It pushed through me and shattered my heart, encapsulating me in stunned immobility. In that moment, as the world turned upside down around us, had he lifted his hand and beckoned to me rather than jumped to wrap his arms about me, I would have gone to him without hesitation. That thought alone made me reverse my original opinion and decide that his glare was not something to hope returned. What a mess of contradictions I was!

My thoughts were as disordered as Bodden Chapel was now. I disliked how lost Mr Darcy looked, yet I could not entirely wish for him to regain the ability to look at me as he did before the accident. His glare was as much a part of him as the strong, square fingers tapping a steady tattoo on his leg, but I had never fully felt comfortable with it. That glare of his produced in me a dislike for his disagreeable manners, curiosity to know his thoughts regardless, and most importantly, allowed me to keep at bay any lingering opinions on full lips and errant curls!

My disquiet manifested itself in a quiet huff, which naturally Mr Darcy fixed on.

“How are you recovering, Miss Elizabeth?”

His voice carried an unmistakable element of concern, which made me study his face all the more. I knew he could not see me, yet I blushed at not being able to look away.

“I am nearly all healed, thank you. And…and you? Mr Bingley has spoken of your condition.”

I winced at the inelegance of my words. Mr Darcy, to his credit, did not show displeasure at my reference to his blindness. I knew that

he was not reconciled with his circumstances, but how I knew that, I could not say. Only that intuitively, I knew he would hate every restriction it placed upon him. I could not claim to be familiar with him to such a degree, yet I knew my impression was true.

"Thank you for speaking of it. I did not know how to broach such a subject with you, but of course, you must learn of it. You have every right to wonder what implications it has for you."

Again I blushed at his reference to our paired future, but the prevailing feeling I felt was…compassion. On impulse, I rested my hand on one of his where it still restlessly tapped on his leg. Mr Darcy immediately went utterly still as if he did not have the ability to command his muscles to move. Even his chest was motionless, his breathing frozen.

Immediately, I pulled my hand away. He was too slow to respond; his hands lifted to catch mine only to grasp air and slowly return to rest on his legs. I watched them settle and felt ashamed. I could not reach out to him again. I simply could not, despite the sudden clarity of how grievously lonely his world must feel to him now. A world of darkness robbed every personal interaction of so much. My hand twitched, the muscles knowing I ought to offer this small kindness, but I did not reach out. Ashamed of myself, I looked around for Miss Darcy and the colonel in desperation. Their touch was proper, desired even. Mr Darcy could only desire for my hand as a way to ground him in a world of swirling night.

"I am sorry you suffered such a consequence in ensuring my safety. It does not seem fair."

I could at least offer these sincere words. Mr Darcy and I might never have really liked each other, but I could not see his difficulty and be totally immune to it.

"Please do not…that is to say, I…I cannot explain how the sight of…" His voice shook and then his jaw went rigid and his lips pressed together.

A moment later, his voice once again regulated, he continued, "It was impossible to act otherwise, and I do not regret it despite my condition. Regardless, it is the way it is, and I must learn to accept it."

"Mr Bingley said that your physician believes your sight will return with time," I offered with false lightness, hoping to dispel the morose and disquieting atmosphere around us.

It was unfathomable, but when Mr Darcy seemed to be about to speak of his turmoil, I could not bear it. I was grateful when he stopped, because it did not sit well with me to see his spirit weakened. As much as I disliked his pride, it suited him. I understood myself enough to know that my wish to avoid hearing his difficulties was for my own protection as well. It was selfish of me. I did not wish to

know Mr Darcy was brought low, for it would rob me of my aversion to him if I were required to see that he suffered because of me. If I had not needed to be rescued, he would not have been injured in this way.

"Thank you for rescuing me from a dire fate. I am not ignorant of what might have happened to me had you not acted as you did."

Mr Darcy turned to me. He might not be able to see, but that only opened up the expressions of his face to show how much he disliked my speaking of my possible death. His blank eyes flashed with fear. Perhaps he was seeing those last moments before we were both buried in darkness.

Or perhaps the fear was for the future. I did not doubt the uncertainty that lay before him. I hoped he would regain his sight, for I would feel miserable to know I had been responsible for breaking someone, anyone.

"I do not wish for your gratitude."

His words, spoken so low as to be almost scraping the gravel at our feet, still had the power to upset me. His actions had saved my life, and I was not even allowed to express my thanks! For all he had lost on my behalf, he had not lost his arrogance. Not wish for my gratitude, indeed!

"Well, nevertheless, you have it," I ground out.

My companion's brows puckered, but other than that, he did not respond to my words. No nod of acknowledgement. Could he not recognise how awful it was to accept that my very life was owed to a man I disliked? He must know how difficult it was for me to be beholden in such a way. Although I was grateful, I could not help but feel it had cost me every bit as much as it had cost him. Particularly when next, without any expression, feeling, or passion, Mr Darcy spoke the words that he had come to say.

"Miss Elizabeth, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

I do not know how I stayed seated. How I did not lurch forward out of the bench and run to the house. I hated this obligation of his. I hated that the only marriage proposal I was to receive was not one of love. Yet I could not decline it. Awful as it was that I had no choice but to marry Mr Darcy, it was still worse to know how much he loathed the idea himself. He did not love me and I did not love him, yet we were bound to this future. Every hope of my girlish dreams was fractured by his unwilling question. It was utterly intolerable.

My eyes caught a movement on the other side of the garden. Colonel Fitzwilliam's all-too-perceptive gaze caught my own, and I knew in that moment that I must hide every brutal and painful feeling from then on. Colonel Fitzwilliam, though hardly more than a stranger, had the ability to read me as though he was a relation. Swiftly, I looked away from him.

Mr Darcy had lost his sight in saving my life. He ought not ever know that accepting his offer would make me lose a bit of my soul in exchange.

“I thank you, Mr Darcy, yes.”

Mr Darcy breathed deeply beside me, his movements contrasting with my own. Where he seemed to draw in great heaps of air in relief, I felt I could not breathe at all. It was as if I was buried all over again and my lungs were on fire. I blinked rapidly at the stinging of my eyes. Now was not the time to be missish.

“What are you wearing?”

Chapter Eleven



Mr Darcy's astonishing question snatched me from my misery and my spine stiffened at the affront. Did he think that because we were betrothed, he could speak such improprieties? To speak of my clothing? And in the middle of the garden where another might overhear? I bit my lip to hold back a sharp retort. I may be bound to this man for the rest of my days, but I would not be subjected to humiliation. I had no doubt that if he could see my eyes, they would communicate just how offensive his question was. Good heavens, how I blushed at his words! At least his impropriety had the ability to help me regulate my swirling and suffocating self-pity. My breathing, no longer hindered, was hitched and huffing quite along now.

I lifted my face to his and there died my anger.

It all drained from me, limb by limb, like a pail of cool water running through my veins. The expression on Mr Darcy's face was curious, lost. He was not wishing me to describe myself for any salacious desires, but because he had no picture in his mind. I sensed he asked in an attempt to ground himself. Heaven knows, we were probably both left off balance now that our fate was secure.

Still, niggling self-righteousness in the face of this, from my former-enemy-turned-betrothed, caused me to ask him why.

Mr Darcy tipped his head to the side in a gesture that seemed as if he were no longer aware of how to regulate his posture as rigidly as he once did. He hesitated for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision of sorts with a slight nod.

"I feel the bench behind my legs; it has a swirling pattern on it. Its cool temperature feels more like iron than stone. The gravel stones beneath my feet have a softness around them as if the grass is encroaching on their space and softening their feel. We are facing nearly due east, for the morning sun is warming my face. I can hear leaves rustling, so we are not too far from the oaks around your home. Although I cannot see them, I know we are surrounded by roses of some variety. Their smell is strong but not robust enough to persuade me this bench is a large one…for I can still detect the vanilla and lilac scent you prefer. Had I not the sound of your voice confirming to my ears that you are nearby, your lovely scent would have assured me so.

Your dress is the only portion that is missing from this picture I am trying to paint in my mind of this moment. I can readily imagine the way the sun dapples through the locks of your hair, colouring some to gold among the chocolate curls. That is, of course, if you are not wearing a bonnet. Are you wearing a bonnet?"

I was stunned by his words. They swirled around me like the scent of the rose bushes, brushing against my skin and making me feel every nerve and point of contact. How eloquently Mr Darcy spoke. How disarming it was to hear him describe everything around us. I had the power of sight, yet he saw more than I.

My lips replied without conscious thought, "I am not."

His smile transformed his features, and once again I was seized, held captive by it. "Then I shall not try to correct my painting by adding such an unnecessary covering. I am glad, for I was loath to lose the sunlight through your hair. I want to remember everything as it is."

I could not speak, and I suspected Mr Darcy was beginning to understand why. Never had he said anything so complimentary to me. It left me adrift and as lost to the world around us as his blindness left him. I did not like to think of myself as vain, yet I was profoundly affected by the gentle tones of his speech and the flattering way he described me.

He cleared his throat. "And your dress, Elizabeth?"

I was startled by his use of my name and tried hard to summon affront to it, but I was distracted almost immediately. I watched as his hand slid slowly off his leg and carefully, hesitantly, traversed the distance to where mine was. When his fingers encountered the fabric of my dress, he stilled. It was not until I spoke that he reverently pinched a little of the fabric between his fingers and felt its texture.

"It is white, with purple flowers." My voice cracked, but I pressed on, using impertinence to settle my nerves. "The sleeves and bodice have pale purple ribbons and the hem—you will have no difficulty believing—is discoloured, wet with the morning dew."

I was surprised when Mr Darcy tilted his head back with laughter. Despite the confusing feelings I was experiencing, I reached for his hand and he released my dress in favour of holding it. I could not help but be filled with some strange and terrifying elation for having produced such a reaction in the normally sombre man. It was heady and addicting, and I had the strange desire to attempt it again.

We settled into a comfortable silence for a time. I was conscious of the fact that our relations were steadfastly keeping their distance. I knew our garden did not boast of many unique florae to inspect, yet I was thankful for their consideration and willingness to grant us this reprieve.

In an attempt to distract myself from the fascinating jolts up my arm from the way Mr Darcy was, one by one, freely acquainting himself with the texture and shape of my fingers, I gathered my courage and asked about his condition.

“What is it like not being able to see?”

I almost wished the words unsaid, for his hands stopped their playful exploring, and the peace left his features, replaced by a frown. I had distressed him with my question and felt ashamed for the insensitivity of it. I had only wished to distract myself and to understand this new aspect that was surely to have some consequence on both our lives.

When I could see that Mr Darcy’s mood had shifted irreparably, my own turned once again towards frustration. Who was this mercurial man I was to marry? Was I always to watch my words and actions lest I displease him and make my life a misery? I attempted to reclaim my hand and gasped when he would not release it.

His fingers pressed around mine, preventing me from pulling away. I opened my mouth to protest when he cut me off.

“In a word, infuriating.”

Mr Darcy would likely be gladdened to know he could, with the power of few words, set me on my head. His obvious displeasure and unwillingness to relinquish my hand were still sources of irritation, yet his brief, terse reply left me curious enough to wish for him to elaborate. Curious and once again spiralling towards compassion.

I ought to have excused myself, hailed one of our relations, or dismissed Mr Darcy to make his speech to my father. But instead, I ceased trying to retrieve my hand and studied his face as I asked, “In what way?”

Mr Darcy turned fully to me, and the look on his face seemed as if he were hoping by sheer will to force his eyes to work again. “There are things I cannot imagine doing without the ability to see, Elizabeth.” His voice gentled. “There are things that are agonising to contemplate never seeing again.”

The alteration in his voice penetrated me, and I could not find words to respond. My first thought was of never seeing loved ones’ faces again. It was, as he said, agonising. I knew Mr Darcy was generally not an amiable man, but I feared this accident would have him sink into lower moods than even those for which he was known. I wondered what kind of life I was to have with such a man.

My eyes closed of their own accord with every attempt I made to still the burning behind them. I could not, would not, shed tears in public and certainly not for an audience. I utilised every method I could to bring my emotions into check.

When I felt the unexpected caress of Mr Darcy’s hand on the back

of my neck, I did not scream, though it was hot in my throat. My eyes snapped open, and I jumped forward, his hand falling to the back of the bench that had provided him a route to me.

"Mr Darcy!" I finally uttered in shaking tones.

He turned again on the bench, pulling his arm high above him so as not to inadvertently make contact with me again. It was embarrassing in the extreme for both of us. Mr Darcy's face closed off to any indication of his previous motives or current thoughts. His cheeks pinked though, and he released the hand he had been holding captive. I had humiliated him. His surprise touch was still galloping in my heart.

"I beg your pardon, sir. You startled me."

"I meant you no harm."

"Still, it was unexpected," I tried to explain gently.

"Forgive me, then."

The defeat in his voice was there even though I knew he attempted to hide it. So much had changed in a matter of weeks. Before our trip to the ruins, this man was confident, arrogant, and proud. In the cave he was sure, comforting, and compassionate. I hated that it felt as if these aspects of his character were undermined by the helplessness of his injury. I disliked seeing him this way, and I suspected he loathed in equal measure being seen as such.

"I know enough of you, Mr Darcy, to understand you could not have meant me harm." Even as the words left my lips, their truth ran through me. I hoped he believed them also.

"Yet my very presence makes you uncomfortable! I cannot see, but I am not a monster."

We were at constant odds and misunderstandings, it would seem. Was I ever to find a place of serenity in my life? His words cut me in a way I could not have credited possible. I could not allow him to persist in believing what he did.

"I do not think you a monster, Mr Darcy. You could not have known, but my eyes were closed, and so your touch was a surprise. I realise that with our new understanding, certain liberties…"

"Liberties!" He groaned and framed his face with his hands. His clear disgust at the very thought caused my cheeks to catch fire. Anger and shame assaulted me at turns.

Mr Darcy turned his head to me, revulsion clear on his features. I was prepared to leave him at the sight of his expression. But his words forestalled me.

"Elizabeth, please understand that although we are to marry, you do not need to…please do not feel obligated to endure any…liberties from me." He spat the word as though it were abhorrent to him. "I did not mean to startle you or force you to accept my attentions. I listened

carefully for any protest when I moved to… I apologise that it was unwelcome. I…blast these eyes!"

I did not know the proper way to reply. I was certain anything I might say would be wrong, for I could not fathom what it would be like to fumble through life without one of my senses. Nor could I rightly decide whether his touch was unwelcome. It was mostly, as I said, a matter of being startled.

"Mr Darcy…"

He fell still once again, his jaw firm, waiting on what I might say.

"I was just startled, sir. Truly, that was all. I thank you for your consideration with regards to future attentions. I assure you, I shall tell you whether they are not welcome." Good heavens, this was a mortifying subject of which to speak! "A little warning, perhaps, might not be amiss is all, Mr Darcy."

"Fitzwilliam. Please call me Fitzwilliam."

I swallowed thickly. Were all men this impossible to predict? It was a reasonable request, and he had already made free with my Christian name, but it felt like far too much at this point for me—probably because I felt so exposed, having to speak so freely with one I barely knew, and generally disliked. I could not explain my reluctance, even to myself, yet I hoped he would understand. I could confidently say my nerves were raw from the cascading and transitioning tones of our conversation. I longed for the quiet of solitude; I had much to contemplate. Mr Darcy was an enigma, and the prospect of learning to understand him left me feeling rather irritated. My foot began tapping the ground as I tried to form the most diplomatic words of denial I could.

"As I can imagine it is for you, our sudden shared future is something with which I am still coming to terms. Might I have a little time to get used to the notion of speaking so informally with you?"

Mr Darcy tilted his chin up and away, but a moment later he turned again to me. I could not read the expression on his face then. It was determined, to be sure, but also disquieted. How much his condition must make communicating clearly all the more difficult for him.

"Of course, take your time. Would you prefer I not use your Christian name?"

My foot tapped all the more quickly, and Mr Darcy soon turned in that direction as if he could see it. I pressed my palm to my knee in an effort to still myself. It made little sense, and I was the worst kind of hypocrite, but I did not think I wished for him to cease using my given name. But how was I to say as much without revealing my double standard? I decided finally to defer to the gentleman on this.

"What is your preference in the matter?"

He pressed his lips together, drawing my eyes to the movement. “I regret that so much of our situation requires us to forsake the way we might have wished for…events to transpire.”

Indeed, if I did not already know it, this speech of his was proof enough of his reluctance to enter into this marriage. I began to wonder: had either of us been able to foresee the consequences of the outing to Bodden Chapel, would we have gone?

“I think it would be well for us to take advantage of any opportunity from this point forward…”

Mr Darcy, I knew, was a man of action, yet his careful wording, his dancing around the answer to my question, pushed me to interject heatedly, “You may speak plainly, sir.”

He paused, but then with a resolute nod of his head, spoke his mind. “We must marry, as you know. And while the circumstances regarding our union are less than ideal, I would wish that wherever possible, we take advantage of choice. If we have the ability to choose what would make us happy, then we seize upon it. So to answer your question—and I do beg your pardon, but you did say to speak plainly—yes, it is my desire to call you by your Christian name.”

My eyes fluttered as I processed the fullness of his speech. The circumstances of our marriage were less than ideal, yet if Mr Darcy, possibly facing a life full of darkness, could wish to focus only on the things we could decide for ourselves, then I could too. His choice was not a difficult one for me to accept. I had already admitted to myself that I preferred the way his voice formed my name.

“Then for certain, you must call me by my given name.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth.”

I wondered whether I would ever get used to the swiftness with which Mr Darcy changed his moods. He was at times gruff and in the next moment gentle. Likewise, his moods had the power to influence mine. It was maddening. Even now, as I heard him stifle a quiet chuckle, I was bemused by it.

“Perhaps it would be best, Mr Darcy, if you were to simply tell me what amuses you so. It is not as expertly hidden as you might think.”

“It is only that I think there may be some aspects of your personality that I can see better now than I could before the accident.”

“And what might those be?”

Mr Darcy did not answer at first. Instead he tilted his head and replied, “I think perhaps I shall not tell you just yet. My theory has not been adequately tested.”

“If there is a question that pertains to me, do you not think it might be best to simply ask me instead of testing your theories?”

Mr Darcy could not withhold a chuckle this time. I wanted to be amused with him, but little did I understand its source, and so I could

not. Instead, however, I felt a little frustrated at the gentleman for being so disobliging. I was beginning to wonder whether I was just as mercurial as he was, or perhaps it was being in his presence that sent my emotions circling so haphazardly. Never have I felt such an array in so short a time as I did when Mr Darcy was present.

"Very well, I believe now I do have sufficient evidence."

"Do enlighten me, and I shall see whether you are correct," I said through clenched teeth.

Mr Darcy leaned slightly forward and with nearly perfect accuracy, pressed his palm to my bouncing knee. The jolt of sensation that shot through me had me jumping again in my seat.

"When you are displeased, you bounce your leg."

"I…"

I was ready to contradict him most adamantly, yet I was stunned to think that he might be correct.

Mr Darcy slid ever so slightly closer to me, his palm still pressing against my knee. The impulse to bounce it decreased as he drew nearer.

"I am not saying you are correct, Mr Darcy; however, I might point out that is quite the observation for you to make in one morning without the benefit of sight."

"I first noticed it long before today, Elizabeth," Mr Darcy said, a glint in his eye. "You tapped your foot at times in our space in the ruins. And when I think on it, there were times during your stay at Netherfield before that, when your poor slipper was abused horribly."

My mind blanked and then spurted the most inappropriate response. "Well, what a valuable tool to have at your disposal for when we are wed."

All humour drained from his face and was replaced by a careful schooling of his emotions. His brown eyes, although lacking the focus they had when he could see, filled with a churning liquidity in their depths. They were like melted chocolate now.

His voice became hoarse, and more than once, he paused to clear it. "When we are wed…," he repeated, almost to himself. "How clever you are to point that out. I shall certainly tuck that away for future use. It will surely help in preventing me from making matters worse."

"No doubt you will have learned this from one or another of your married friends, but it behoves a husband to learn more than how to detect when he has angered his wife, but how to fix it! Or better yet, to prevent it!"

I laughed softly at him as I said this, while gently lifting his hand off my knee where it had already disconcerted me enough with its presence. I thought it would be a very good thing if Mr Darcy did not learn at this time that a gentle touch such as that was the key to

eradicating any contrary feelings I might have.

Mr Darcy may not have been in possession of his sight, but he certainly could perceive—much to my relief—that the current topic was disconcerting me.

"Since we are speaking plainly. Do you have a preference as to when we marry?"

I ought to have taken the opportunity he presented to request a long engagement, but the words that came out of my mouth were there before I could hold them back.

"If you have a preference, sir, you may state it."

"I do not wish to rush you, Elizabeth, and there are factors to be considered."

He was back to running his fingers across my hand as if memorising its shape. I tipped my head up and focused on the passing clouds. They held no fascination, to my chagrin.

"I should like to see my bride on my wedding day."

His voice came like a soft breeze, and I stilled to feel it against my heart. It had been said in so subdued a manner that I at once wanted to think I had imagined it. But no, the words still pressed against me and spoke more of what his sight had stolen from him than anything he had up until now conveyed. I had no notion what ought to be said. I could not fathom not being able to see the events or parties of my wedding day. It was too painful a thought. But then that loathsome, selfish creature inside me, that one I was most ashamed of, raised her head, replacing compassion with my own concerns once again.

"What are you saying, sir? Do you wish to postpone the ceremony until you can see again? Please do not misunderstand me. I wish you might regain all of your abilities, and I do share with Mr Bingley and others every hope that this…condition is only temporary, but if that is not to be the case, we must still marry."

Mr Darcy hands stilled, and he threaded his fingers between mine in a most shockingly intimate way. "Elizabeth, hear me now. We shall marry regardless. There is not an alternative that I can tolerate. However, among other things, it is disagreeable to me in every way to burden you with my care."

The sound of footsteps approaching prevented me from any reply adequate enough for such a statement. Instead, I was left only to say in hurried and whispered tones, "Let us not set a date just yet, sir, if it allows you time to regain your health. However, know this, Mr Darcy: the male sex is not the only one to possess integrity and honour. If it should transpire that you do not regain your sight, please afford me the ability to determine what I deem a burden."

I felt the slight pressure of Mr Darcy's hand on my knee again, stilling that limb's infuriating movement. He could not know that I

was angrier with myself than him. I vowed to banish this selfishness within. I stood then, breaking his contact, and with a forced smile, turned to welcome the rest of our party. Mr Darcy's relations were nearly upon us, with my sister and Mr Bingley not far behind.

"Miss Darcy, I hope you have adequately educated your cousin on the flower of his interest."

"I have, thank you, Miss Elizabeth. You have a lovely garden."

"Thank you."

These words were the most Miss Darcy had ever uttered in my presence, and I was pleased with her growing comfort. It would be good to have at least one Darcy that could be easily understood, and who likewise did not turn my insides upside down with every conversation.

Mr Darcy stood then and spoke, his voice regulated in such a way that I could not decide whether my impertinence just now had any real effect on him. Infuriating man!

"Before we depart, I would like to leave my regards with Mr Bennet."

It was clear then to all that the deed had been done. My eyes darted between our companions and retreated to the ground in embarrassment.

"That is kind of you, sir. I believe he is in his study," Jane offered gently.

"If the ladies are ready to return to the house, shall we make our way now?"

More than likely, Mr Darcy said this for the benefit of his relations, so they might once again take his arm and subtly guide him in the direction of the house. But before either of them could so much as step forward—and indeed, before I could question my own motives—I slipped my hand through Mr Darcy's sleeve.

"Come then, I shall show you to his book room."

Perhaps it was a lingering wish to put point to my statement that I would choose what was and was not a burden to me that possessed me to take the task of guiding Mr Darcy towards the house myself. Whatever the reason, since Mr Darcy did not object, I did not choose to evaluate it any further.

Chapter Twelve



During the course of the rest of our time with our guests, the only rational thought that had any clarity in my mind was how grateful I was that my father asserted uncharacteristic authority and concern over the situation as to send my mother and sisters away for a time. It was enough to have the knowing glances, disjointed conversation, and obvious anticipation scenting the air as we sat in the parlour having tea while Mr Darcy—my future husband!—spoke with my father alone in his study. If Mama had been home, her abrupt outbursts would have ensured my every humiliation. Miss Darcy and her cousin were amiable to be sure; nevertheless we all knew why their relation was not with us. Everyone was aware of the purpose of Mr Darcy's visit with my father, yet we could not speak of it. Perhaps if our engagement had happened in an organic way, resulting from mutual affection, we might all have been sitting comfortably together with smiles in happy discussion of our futures.

Instead, I was acutely aware that I was not Mr Darcy's choice in a bride, and his relations knew this was a matter of honour, not love. Still, I could not help but be glad that, regardless, we were spared the effusions of my mother and the silliness of my sisters.

After a time, our guests stood to make their farewells, and the colonel expressed a desire to be introduced to my father. We both knew it was a means for him to be of assistance to Mr Darcy upon leaving the study, and so I played along readily. While Jane escorted Mr Bingley and Miss Darcy out to the courtyard to their carriage, I walked the colonel to my father's study.

I rapped lightly on the door, unsurprised to feel the echo of the knock on the pace of my heart.

My father greeted me at the door, and for some reason I could not meet his eyes. I imagined how little he liked giving his blessing, needful though it was.

"Papa, this gentleman wishes to be introduced to you. May I present Mr Darcy's cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Sir, my father, Mr Bennet."

I spared a glance into the room as my father and the colonel exchanged pleasantries. Mr Darcy had stood when my father opened

the door to me. He circled now behind the chair he had occupied and held the back of it in as natural a stance as I had yet to see him since he had lost his sight.

"Well, Darcy, we ought to leave the Bennets to the remainder of their morning," Colonel Fitzwilliam said with a chuckle. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr Bennet."

My father smiled and returned the sentiment. "Colonel, if you do not mind, I might ask you a little about your profession. The militia has recently descended upon our poor town and sent its female residents into a flutter."

To my surprise, my father gestured to the colonel to walk ahead, and turning to me with an affectionate kiss to my cheek, he whispered, "It will be well, my Lizzy." Conversationally, he added, "Elizabeth, be so kind as to show Mr Darcy out, will you?"

"Yes, Papa."

I could see by the amused expression on Colonel Fitzwilliam's face that he approved of my father's arrangement of persons, and he readily began an animated comment about the wreckage soldiers are apt to leave in the hearts of the female sex. The two of them, well on their way to fast friends already, walked on down the hall leaving me alone with Mr Darcy.

I turned to him and stepped into the room for the first time.

"Your father is an astute man, Elizabeth. I should not have expected otherwise, given what I know of you. Yet I cannot help but feel he wielded his powers of observation with disconcerting accuracy upon me."

I smiled at this description of my father. "He fancies himself a student of characters."

"As I remember, you do too."

It had been such a short, inconsequential conversation at Netherfield when Jane was ill. For my part, it was an effort to soothe the awkwardness of a comment made by my mother when she had come to enquire about Jane's health. I did not expect he would remember it at all, or with any accuracy.

"Yes, though I am beginning to suspect I am not as skilled as I once thought, nor as talented as my father." I certainly was finding aspects of Mr Darcy's character that I had not anticipated.

Mr Darcy rubbed his jaw with one hand and his throat made a sound of contemplation. "Nor I. My interview with him has given me much to ponder."

Did I imagine sadness in Mr Darcy's tone? I studied his face and determined it was in my head, for his expression did not reflect it. I began walking towards the gentleman, ready to escort him from the house.

In an effort to hide the tremor in my movements, I spoke lightly. “You have discovered my favourite chair, sir. That is the very one I prefer while ensconced in this room with my father.”

Mr Darcy smiled then with interest in his eyes as he ran a hand across the glossy wood of the chair frame and onto the cloth upholstery below, with a caress I almost felt along my spine.

“Is that so? I wish I knew how it looked so that I could picture you thus.”

I would have to get used to the disconcerting way Mr Darcy spoke of picturing me in different settings and remember that he was without sight and could remain so for some time. I would not have thought one consequence of that lost sense would be this eloquence of speech. He meant nothing romantic by it, to be sure, but I could not help feeling my face flame at any instance of myself in Mr Darcy’s thoughts. He merely wished to form the world around him in the absence of first-hand visual knowledge.

I cleared my throat as I came nearer. “It is merely a dull maroon pattern with brown stripes. Not a fine piece of furniture, but as you will now know by experience, it is comfortable and soft.”

Mr Darcy chuckled softly. “My experience in it held little comfort, Elizabeth. No doubt facing your father had something to do with that.”

His answer was so human, so attractively vulnerable and humorously deprecating that I had to laugh with him. I ran my hand fondly across the fabric, smiling softly at the image of the master of Pemberley being under the power of my father’s wit.

When Mr Darcy’s hand captured my roving one, all thoughts of humour fled with the currents pulsing up my arm. My eyes snapped up to his and were mesmerised by the gentle look of amusement in them. Mr Darcy’s face was relaxed and serene. Different from the slightly troubled expression lurking almost imperceptibly on his features when my father had opened the door to me.

“And I suppose you sit here on occasion, your feet tucked charmingly under your skirts, a book in hand, and your slippers discarded haphazardly on the rug below.”

I gasped, for that was precisely how I occupied this chair most frequently. It was disconcerting, to say the least, to have him picture such an unladylike image of me. It took all my effort to muster enough power of speech over my embarrassment to deny it, only to have his next words send my thoughts flying again.

“No, do not contradict me. I should like to imagine you in such a relaxed posture in this chair, regardless of whether it is true.”

“Come, Mr Darcy, your friends will wonder at our absence.”

I placed my arm through his and tried not to react to how quickly

he placed his other hand atop mine.

"Perhaps, in time, you might find its like at Pemberley."

For such a seemingly innocuous statement, I could not help noticing the hope that dripped from each of the words. Mr Darcy was looking ahead when I reacted to the plaintive tone of his voice and searched his face. It seemed like such a strange thing to hope for. I was sure there were any number of fine chairs at his estate in which I might find comfort.

It was simply another odd aspect of his personality I could not understand. I wondered whether I would ever comprehend this man who was to become my husband.

"I am certain I shall." Even as I said it, I knew intuitively that I had missed something important in our unusual conversation.

Mr Darcy grimaced slightly, although he hid it well with a slight turning up of his lips. "Would you allow me, Elizabeth, to call on you often? It would be my wish that we learn about each other as much as we are able before we wed."

My instinct was to deny this, as natural a request as it was. The longer I was in this man's presence, the easier it became to forget the arrogance and pride he had often displayed before the accident. I could not yet decide whether this softer side of Mr Darcy was a result of the accident or, as Jane had often suggested to me, that the gentleman improved upon further acquaintance.

In an effort to push aside such a conundrum and avoid answering Mr Darcy, I spoke with false humour.

"My friend Miss Lucas would say that 'happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance, and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to spend your life'."

Mr Darcy did not find amusement in my words as I had hoped. Instead, he stopped our movement towards exiting the house and said to me, "I have found Miss Lucas to be an intelligent lady in all other aspects, but I cannot agree with her on this. I hope very much, Elizabeth, despite the beginnings of our union, that in knowing me better, you might find it possible for us, in time, to find happiness together."

I swallowed at the intensity in his eyes, shuttered as they still were. I could not deny the sincerity in his words. Despite this, I did not feel comfortable with the notion. Did I want that with Mr Darcy? Could happiness wed to such a gentleman even be possible? I could not help but feel the weight of that unanswerable question press upon me.

I am ashamed to say that I could not answer with the same earnest hope he did. I took the coward's way and deflected once again—as

was seeming to become a detestable habit of mine—with a reply of flippant impertinence.

"Well, Mr Darcy, you have already discovered a means to know when I am cross. You are well on your way to having every advantage a husband might want over his wife. Perhaps before we marry, you will discover other methods of divining my moods."

"One can hope. Shall we?" Mr Darcy smiled at my words, though I thought there was something off about it. When he gestured with his other arm ahead of me, I guided him towards the entrance.

With little obvious help, the enigmatic gentleman was soon comfortably seated in his carriage, his passengers alongside him, and our morning guests departed. No sooner had they left the lane, I propelled myself in the opposite direction towards a forest path I preferred. I heeded not the calls of my father and sister, but pressed on, walking at a heated pace. Mr Jones could choke on his supper! I was well enough healed for a long walk and would do so forthwith!

My whole world felt on its end, and none of the events of the morning would settle in my mind in any acceptable manner. They bounced and shifted so rapidly, I felt as battered on the inside as my body was after the collapse. Nothing was as it ought to be. Mr Darcy had upheld his promise and offered for my hand, securing my reputation. If I were honest, I was not ever really concerned that he would not. Yet now it had happened, and I was engaged to Mr Darcy.

Abruptly my legs stopped, and I reached out to steady myself against a nearby trunk. Engaged to Mr Darcy! Great grasping breaths heaved through me, reminding me that despite my impetuous exertions, I was not fully recovered.

But the sharp stabs of pain did not prevent me from reflecting on increasingly more upsetting notions. Notions that did not calm my breathing or settle my body so I would not feel the shots of discomfort. No, these notions were absurd and whispered against the storm in my mind that the idea of marrying Mr Darcy was not as awful a thought as I had always suspected it would be.

That ought to have brought me comfort. For who would want to marry a man they disliked? Unfortunately for me, I was marrying a man I wanted to dislike, but was having an increasingly difficult time doing so. What mischief, what sorcery, did that impenetrable darkness cast upon me? I was captive with the man for less than four and twenty hours, yet I left that tomb of sorts into the light of day and could not seem to look at Mr Darcy in the same light as I had before.

In that horrible, earthly enclosure, Mr Darcy had lost his sight and mine had been forever altered. Once I thought I could not imagine a worse fate then marrying someone like Mr Darcy. Now I began to fathom one, and my heart lurched in a pain greater than my sides at a

new, worse alternative. If my view of Mr Darcy changed, if I could not dislike him as I once did, then I was at risk of greater agony. My heart might be touched, and I might lose it to affection for him. God forbid! Worse, I might come to love him.

I must prevent it from happening. Mr Darcy was as he always was. It was only his blindness that rendered him different. As soon as his sight returned, I would see the proud gentleman I had always known him to be. It must be so, because I could not endure the alternative. I could not be married to a man who could need me the rest of his life but never love me. Into what kind of hell had I emerged from under those ruins?

Chapter Thirteen



By the same time the next day, I had fully analysed my ragged thoughts. It was only natural that I should feel some disturbance of thought on the day that I became betrothed to a man I had not chosen. And the appearance of Mr Darcy for the first time since our terrifying and difficult time together in the ruins must bear some blame. Certainly, that event bore culpability for the volatile state of my feelings. I knew it was only to be expected that after such a harrowing event, my feelings upon seeing the only other person to endure it with me would be overwhelming.

Furthermore, the man himself was altered by the experience. Indeed, it ought to be expected that he might be! But I had not anticipated that his manner might be softened and his vulnerability would be attractive and disconcerting in equal measure. My new awareness of his physical presence, or susceptibility to his growing charm, was surprising, to say the least. The result was the flustered and fevered panic that beset me when he left in his carriage the day before. The crazed notion of one day loving Mr Darcy—and the fear of it—was certainly a product of all the tumult of emotions set upon me on a most trying day.

After the therapeutic effects of a long walk, a quiet evening, and an exhausted, blessedly dreamless sleep, I awoke the next morning feeling more myself and certainly more able to meet the occupants of Netherfield, one in particular, with a more rational frame of mind. I would not be overset as I had been the day before. With resolve, I determined I would attempt to reconcile myself to the match and be a good wife for Mr Darcy despite my many fluctuating thoughts about the gentleman.

I drew a fortifying breath and lifted the bedclothes to ready myself for the day. At that moment, the clouds outside my window drifted and a beam of the bright morning sun shone directly in my face, causing me to protect my eyes with the blanket once again. My eyes were shut but still felt the sting of the light beam behind their lids. With chilling realisation, my newly betrothed came to my mind. I knew that if I waited but another moment and turned my face away from the window, I would see without hindrance. Mr Darcy would

not. Furthermore, he would not have even felt the sun's rays pierce his vision.

Compassion warred with curiosity as I thought of his plight. The accident had wrought many significant changes to my life that I was still grappling with. Those same changes had sentenced Mr Darcy to marriage and added unto it tenfold with the loss of his vision. Consideration for my determination to be a good wife to him, despite how these changes came upon us, had me contemplating more and more the difficulty each day must be for my betrothed.

I lifted the blanket but kept my eyes closed. With careful movements, I sat up and moved my feet off the bed. Immediately, they felt the cold of the floor and my eyes flashed open to look for my slippers. It was but a second before I closed them again. I do not know when I had decided to try to understand what losing one's sight might feel like, but having already succumbed to the temptation of sight with merely a bit of cold toes made me realise how truly dependent I was on that sense.

With my eyes closed again, I determined to attempt to ready myself for the day as far as was possible without using my sight. I shifted my feet around until I felt the softness of my slippers and gratefully pushed my shivering feet into them.

From there, I stood and felt my way to the foot of my bed to find, and then quickly don, my dressing gown. The next step would be to cross the room to my dressing table. With hands out to protect myself, I shuffled wary steps in the direction I felt most accurate. With a bit of laughter, I found myself touching the wall, but much to my chagrin, I could not locate my dressing table. After long side steps around the room, I reached the opposite wall where I finally found my destination. That discovery occurred when my knee collided with the leg of the dressing table most painfully.

Inelegantly, I slumped into the chair there, feeling somewhat accomplished despite my mishaps. My mind went to the way Mr Darcy's relations had subtly led him where he needed to go, and I felt at first a little smug thinking of how I managed to get to my location from the bed without any aid. Immediately, even though I had felt proud, I thought of how embarrassing it would be to have every movement aided by another, yet how essential too. I had not gone unerringly to my dressing table, but had traversed much of the room to get there. My small triumph fell flat, and I was at once filled with shame for even glorying in it.

This was what I set out to do, was it not? To try to understand the plight that my future husband was, and would likely be, facing daily. With a lift of my chin, I set about releasing my plait and combing through my hair. This, I believed, could be accomplished without

sight, as I felt I could pin my hair in my sleep, so oft had I accomplished the task without so much as a mirror when assemblies were held. My younger sisters often burst into my room to sit at my looking glass and fuss at their own appearances, pushing Jane or me aside as they grappled with their coiffures.

After pinning my hair and feeling about my head to determine whether I had missed any locks, I drew a deep breath for what I believed would be the most difficult portion of my toilette. Dressing for the day.

This time when I ventured in the direction of my closet, I stayed near the wall so as to not misstep. My fingers ran along the length of the closet door from the cold metal of the hinges to the opposite edge. From there, I felt the smooth wood, marvelling at how textures seemed to stand out to me and trying to decide whether I even remembered what the grain of the wood looked like. I found the knob and opened the closet. The easiest choice, of course, would be to select a dress that had fastenings in the front. I had several such dresses, but without seeing them, I would most certainly make a mess of the space.

I felt along the shelf and encountered the first dress, using both hands to get a feel for its texture. I felt lace at its neck, and knowing that this dress did not fasten in the front, I quickly plucked it away to feel for the next. Every dress I encountered seemed to fasten in the back, and I became more and more frustrated. I did not have so many dresses that the task should be this difficult!

I was sorely tempted then to give up this ridiculous experiment. So Mr Darcy had similar struggles daily and had for some weeks since the accident. He was rich and could afford any number of servants to find him his clothing, dress him, and see that he does not bump his knee on the furniture.

I do not know why I then did not give up and open my eyes. I might have ended this burning frustration and humiliation at being so helpless in an instant. Instead, I slid down to the floor, sat among my discarded dresses, and found to my utter disbelief that I was crying. My eyes stayed closed though. Perhaps it was the failure that kept them so—or the fact that I was an obstinate, headstrong girl.

The dresses surrounded me like an ocean of muslin and satin. I had felt so many textures that at this point I could no longer determine which dress was which. When I had first entered the closet, I was certain I could picture each garment as I encountered it. Now, they all felt similar, and that hopelessness came back to me. I felt like a child, dependent and stupid. Unable to even select something to wear.

Mr Darcy's question about my dress the day before came to my thoughts then with such force that, with a puff of air, I leant back

against the closet wall with the memory. How plain and dull his world must feel to him now. He could not see the brilliance of the garden and the blue clarity of the sky or know whether or not his valet had dressed him as a clown. Such a simple question he posed to me yesterday: What was I wearing?

At the time, I had felt all the impertinence and rudeness of the query, thinking only of the impropriety of his asking. Now, as I sat defeated on the floor of my closet with dresses strewn about and likely becoming wrinkled beyond repair, I thought only of his need to know something certain.

I had spent perhaps half an hour without my sight and felt as though everything I had once trusted in was murky with uncertainty. I believed I knew my way to the dressing table, but the bruise on my knee told otherwise. I knew I possessed at least three dresses that closed in the front, yet I found not a one. Every thought I believed to be truth was now shrouded with doubt.

A feather-like touch of fabric fell upon my head and slid to my lap in what was a crowning point to my humbling realisation. I felt for the fabric with clumsy hands and determined it was a thin scarf my aunt had gifted me for my birthday. I held it a moment, feeling its texture and searching my mind to paint the pattern of the fabric as I remembered it.

Instead of setting it aside once I had successfully conjured its image, I drew a deep breath, and with determination tied it about my eyes. I would not cow to this difficult task I had set for myself. One day, if Mr Darcy's sight did not return, I would be married to a man who would daily endure this hateful darkness. I could at least ready myself for the day once.

I used the shelves to assist myself to stand and, in doing so, felt another dress. With more careful movements this time, I located the neck opening and felt along its structure to discover happily that it closed in the front. Upon this lucky conclusion, I paused in thought. There was simply no way I could find and secure my stays without my sight.

I felt my cheeks warm at the thought of being thus caught and how ridiculous I must look. There was simply nothing to it; I must dress without stays today. Most of my dresses were modest enough not to need them, and in the heat of the summer, indeed, I sometimes went without.

It took much longer than I thought it ought to, but eventually I was able to pull the dress over my head, place my arms in the right places, and pull the dress down to cover myself. Finding and locating the lacings was somewhat of a trial, but I credit myself with eventual success. The gown did seem to gap a little unnaturally at the bodice,

but I could not find the string to cinch it tighter.

Just as I had finished lacing my boots, Jane's surprised and concerned voice reached my ears.

"Lizzy, what on earth are you about?"

Startled, I stood too quickly and hastily tore off my blindfold. My eyes were not adjusted to the brightness of the room, and shocks of pain shot through my head. My hands lifted to cover my face, both to protect it from the brightness and to hide my blushes.

"Why did you not knock? I was simply…well I was…"

"I did knock but heard no answer. I was worried and—Lizzy, your hair! And your dress!"

It was then, as my eyes adjusted and looked down upon myself, that my heart sunk. What success I thought I might have had this morning was as clear as my vision to be an utter failure. The ties of my dress were offset by one and that explained the gaping bodice, for I had tied the wrong straps together. Looking to my right at the dressing table, I saw at once that the elegant coiffure I had proudly made without sight was nothing more than a nest of curls and pins.

I stepped towards the mirror, already pulling pins out to correct the horrible wrong I had inflicted upon my hair, when my feet caught. I stumbled into the basin of water at the table beside my mirror and knocked the entire thing to the floor. My dress was now soaked and water ran down my legs into my boots, which I saw had been laced together. It was the last straw.

Laughter bubbled up inside me as I once again sat inelegantly at my dressing table. This time, tears streamed at the unseemly mess I was and the complete and utter disaster the morning's experiment had become. My sides developed a stitch as I tried repeatedly without success to curb my mirth. Jane, bewildered and amused at my strange state, ventured further into the room and sat at the end of the bed.

When at last I was able to regulate myself a little better, Jane's compassionate and soft voice was my undoing.

"Lizzy, were you attempting to…that is, were you practising being without sight?"

My heart burst, painful slivers of emotion transforming my tears of laughter to tears of anguish. I had determined to be a good wife to Mr Darcy despite our unwanted union. I realised now that I had issued this test to myself to prove it could be done and was not so terribly bad. A part of me wanted to believe that, since he had lost his sight as a consequence of saving my life, it was a not-so-very-awful thing to be blind. Difficult but not horrible. My tears were for my own ugliness and indifference. How could I be a good wife and still have so little compassion for what he had given up in order to save me?

Going without one's sight was not simply a hardship, it was a

grievous, never-ending night. Every task made a question; every minute, a blank, dark canvas.

Jane sweetly sat waiting for my answer, and in time, I was able to give it. Yes, I had been attempting to see what it was like to be blind. And given the state of my hair and dress and the disorder of my room, I had failed utterly at manoeuvring even the most simple of tasks.

"I cannot, Jane. I cannot see how I can ever marry the man. It would be too much. My heart breaks now for what he must be enduring. How shall I ever live with the constant guilt of knowing it was for me that he gave up his sight? Oh, just listen to me! I have spent the better part of nearly an hour attempting to understand and find compassion for his situation, and still I am beset with my own fears."

Jane silently came and knelt at my feet. Instead of bestowing the much-needed comfort, she sweetly untied the mess of my boot laces and removed them. Then she took my hand and led me to the bed and held me as I cried. My heart broke for Mr Darcy and for the shock he must have felt realising he could no longer see. It broke for both of our uncertain futures, tied so irrevocably to that fateful day at Bodden Chapel.

I wish I could say that I did not shed any tears for my own unhappy state of being forced to marry where I did not love. Where I could not even like. But shame burned through me as a number of tears were for those selfish thoughts.

"Lizzy, you have every right to worry for your future. It speaks well of you to worry. If you did not, I would think you as unfeeling towards Mr Darcy as you batter yourself now."

She silenced my protest as she removed pins and, retrieving the comb, began the arduous process of fixing my hair. "Lizzy, you are very hard on yourself. You see yourself as unfeeling towards Mr Darcy, yet you tried to put yourself in his shoes."

"And only proved how very awful it must be to lose one's sight."

"Indeed. However, I feel certain that should Mr Darcy ever know of your actions this morning—"

"He must never know!" I asserted with mortification at the thought.

Jane laughed and set the brush aside. "I swear to tell no one, dearest sister. But should Mr Darcy ever learn, I am certain he would tell you that you must not feel any guilt at all. I do not believe he is the type of gentleman that would blame you for it nor regret his heroic actions in the least."

For once, despite my own uncertainty on the topic, I allowed my sister's tendency to view all the world as good to permeate my bruised and upended emotions. Humbled and comforted at the same time, I

accepted Jane's words and allowed her to help me correct the deficiencies in my toilette, if not my attitude.

We laughed at the immodest bodice of my dress, which proved to be one of Lydia's placed in my closet by accident. Jane helped me shake and fold my dresses once more to restore my closet. Once I was fully and properly dressed, I embraced her for a long moment.

"Thank you, dearest sister."

Jane left me then with a squeeze of my hand.

I determined that I could not change what had already occurred. Therefore, as was my nature, my lively spirits reappeared, and I decided I would attempt to be the best companion to Mr Darcy that I could. I would not argue with him or be a source of disquiet. In this, I could repay him for his bravery and assure him he need not be ashamed of the wife that was thrust upon him. In my efforts to adhere to decorum and provide good care to my future husband, I would be able to keep my mind and heart focused on the role I was now required to play and prevent myself from being vulnerable to any sentiments of affection at the same time.

With this reminder, I stood up at the sound of a carriage on the drive, and with a deep breath, followed my sister out the door to greet our guests. It was not a surprise that they should call again. Mr Bingley had visited nearly every day since the accident, and now that Mr Darcy and I were engaged, it was to be expected.

I kept a polite smile in place as Mr Bingley, Miss Darcy, and Colonel Fitzwilliam descended the carriage steps. I felt the stiffness in my smile when, after the colonel exited, the door was closed and the grooms walked the carriage towards the stables as our guests approached.

I felt Jane reach for my arm and knew she sought my thoughts on the absence of my betrothed, but that would require me knowing how I felt on the subject. As it was, I felt a mix of emotions: affronted at the slight, worried it portended a reversal of his recovery, and disappointment that he had not come. None of these feelings were appropriate to speak of with our friends, who were even now coming up the steps.

"Welcome! I trust all is well at Netherfield?"

Mr Bingley laughed and affirmed that it was. "We had the pleasure of an early visit from Mr Collins this morning. He is most attentive to my sister. He stays on with her and Mrs Hurst."

Only Mr Bingley could deliver such a speech without an ounce of cynicism. He was truly pleased with how constant a suitor my cousin was proving to be for his sister. I was suddenly beset with curiosity to know how Miss Bingley bore her intended's ceaseless attention. Most days since their betrothal, Mr Collins left early each morning and did

not return until after supper. I had expected Miss Bingley to dissuade the parson from such relentless attendance long before now. She seemed to have no trouble rebuffing his advances on the day he proposed. So the realisation that Mr Collins was not sent packing sooner was indeed a curious thought.

My eyes strayed to Colonel Fitzwilliam's, and there I detected the humour I might have expected in the voice of anyone else speaking as Mr Bingley did of his new brother-to-be. He stifled a mischievous smile and clapped his hands to draw attention.

"And thus you have found our reason for calling again so soon upon you lovely ladies!"

Miss Darcy quietly rebuked her older cousin despite the smile on her face and the laughter all around. I suggested another walk, this time on the lane leading to a small incline.

Mr Bingley enthusiastically seconded the idea and, after a brilliant smile to me, asked Jane whether he might have the pleasure of her company. Unsurprising to all gathered, Jane accepted, and the two of them walked on. For a moment I smiled at the picture, and it struck me that if I took a page from my mother's book and allowed some distance between our groups, perhaps Mr Bingley might use this time to a purpose.

Intentionally, I delayed our departure with a civil smile for my companions as I spoke. "Mr Darcy did not wish to miss Mr Collins's visit today?"

Miss Darcy, tender-hearted as she was, did not pick up on my jest and was quick to begin speaking assurances that her brother did wish to visit Longbourn. Apparently, he had insisted they come in his stead. He was terribly sorry to have to send his regrets. On and on, Miss Darcy spoke reassurances. My face was plastered with understanding and false cheer.

When my eyes turned towards Colonel Fitzwilliam, I was dismayed to see that he saw through my expression to the simmering feelings beneath. Mr Darcy sends his regrets? He sends his relations in his place, and this is the man, who only just the day before expressed a wish for me to know him better? I barely managed to swallow down the scoff that threatened to escape.

"Miss Elizabeth. My cousin suffers terribly this morning with one of the plaguing megrims that he is apt to have now."

"Richard! He did not wish us to disclose that," Miss Darcy whispered, though not quietly enough, which made clear her shock and annoyance at the brazen disregard of her brother's wishes.

I locked eyes with the colonel, unconcerned at present for Miss Darcy's worry of her brother's displeasure. In that moment, I felt all the anger bleed from me, replaced with sincere concern. Before I

could shutter those feelings, the colonel nodded imperceptibly to himself. Whatever he was able to discern in my eyes apparently satisfied some problem for him, and he smiled amiably.

"Do not fret, Poppet. You will not be left to face any of his vexation. It was I who outed my stubborn cousin and shall face the beast alone."

Although he had said it with humour, and Miss Darcy was relieved, displaying an indulgent smile at her cousin, I could not help but ask, "Is Mr Darcy difficult to face when he is made unhappy? To call him a beast does not sound pleasing to a future bride."

Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed, and before Miss Darcy could worry herself into a state, I assured her, "Miss Darcy, if we are to be sisters, you must know something of my character. I dearly love to laugh and therefore shall probably tease all my new family, not the least of which will be your brother. Incessantly. I mean no harm when I do, and you must always tell me whether I go too far."

Miss Darcy nodded and looked to me with awe in her eyes. Uncomfortable with anything nearing praise, I turned to her cousin.

"I am sorry to hear that Mr Darcy is unwell," I began, and soon real concern coloured my tone. "Please tell me, does he suffer much still, from his heroics on my behalf?"

Colonel Fitzwilliam gestured with his hand, and Miss Darcy and I each took an arm. As we began walking, I saw that Mr Bingley and my sister had quite the lead on us. I was pleased with this and turned towards my walking companions for the answer to my question.

"My brother is nearly recovered in every way except for his sight, but on some days, he has the most terrible headaches. They do not always prevent him from being able to join with the rest of the company at Netherfield, but on occasion he is kept to his bed."

Miss Darcy blushed for being so candid and worried her lip a little. I suspected she was concerned with having said too much, and certainly more than her brother would apparently have me know.

"Miss Elizabeth, you will find, if you have not learned this already, that my cousin, in the best of times, is a stubborn, active sort of man. I can see from the smile you are so charmingly trying to hide that you indeed have learned this aspect of his character. It is a strength that served him well when he had an estate to rival Chatsworth thrust upon his shoulders after my uncle passed. Darcy had barely reached his majority at the time. In that instance, his obstinacy was a tool he utilised to learn the responsibilities and perform them with admirable competency—essential for the master of Pemberley."

"I can imagine you are correct, Colonel. I have yet to see Mr Darcy do anything without total competency."

"Then you might likewise see how difficult it is for him to

suddenly be unable to determine even where the food is upon his plate. And on days such as today—which I am pleased to say have become less frequent of late—he cannot endure the rigors of traveling outside his chambers, let alone to a neighbouring estate, no matter the enticement, or shall I say, temptation, waiting there."

I gave Colonel Fitzwilliam a side eye, acknowledging his reference to our conversation the day before, though still not accepting his opinion on the matter. All my life, I had imagined what it might be like to have a brother, and it surprised me to find that the brotherly connexion I felt so soon upon making the colonel's acquaintance brought with it a bit of irritation. Thankfully, he was not to be so near as that, only a cousin, though I imagined the distinction would matter little to him. Already, I had learned he relished in teasing. How unfortunate for me to have met someone who could turn all my mischief right back on me.

His words did give me pause, and I murmured an expression of consideration for Mr Darcy's state. The gentleman evidently discerned a moment of thought was required and turned to his other side, engaging Miss Darcy in a discussion on the surrounding vistas as we climbed the gentle slope of the walking path.

Despite my resolutions that morning, I was affected by the colonel's words. I could imagine a man like Mr Darcy might be brought low by his condition. Impatient to recover yet still beset with perhaps permanent damage. I could not help but feel pain at what he was suffering for his actions to save my life. It did not seem fair that he would be rewarded in such a contrary way. I sent a prayer heavenward on his behalf. I hoped he would find peace and soon find healing sufficient to relieve him from these headaches. I determined to search the library later for my father's herbal remedy journal. Perhaps I might learn more of what may be the source of these megrims and find a solution that could possibly bring Mr Darcy some relief. At the very least—and it might be the only thing I could offer him—I vowed again to be a source of compassion and aid.

Turning back to me, Colonel Fitzwilliam remarked, "I learned today that your cousin's parish is Hunsford, in Kent."

"That is correct. And I imagine, since you learned that from Mr Collins, you likewise may have learned much more than you ever wished to know about his patroness. She is, I am told, a most illustrious lady."

"Lady Catherine de Bourgh, I believe," Colonel Fitzwilliam replied, a smirk about his lips.

I could see that, indeed, my cousin had performed to his best and spoken of the great lady. I wondered what absurdities were uttered and whether I ought to feel embarrassment for them.

“Yes, that is the one. She is most attentive to her vicar and, I am told by my cousin, even condescends to advise him on his sermons!” Laughter bubbled up between us, but before the colonel could speak further, Miss Darcy playfully slapped his arm.

“Desist, Richard! Miss Elizabeth, Lady Catherine is our aunt.”

“Oh dear.” I choked in sudden concern, but the colonel laughed, easing my conscience.

“You must forgive me, I could not help the little ruse. I learned of your cousin’s preference when I overheard him describing his home to Miss Bingley. When I enquired further, I realised the connexion. Mr Collins was yet unaware that Lady Catherine is our aunt.”

“I hope you did not educate him on the fact. For I fear if you did, Mr Darcy will not have a restful time at Netherfield.”

“I did tell Mr Collins of our connexion, and I believe he made his pleasure quite obvious. And have no fear for my cousin, he is safely in his chambers and will bless me for my interference when he learns all.”

“That does sound ominous. What interference did you have to utilise? Miss Darcy, Colonel, please forgive any improprieties exhibited by my cousin. Mr Collins can often forget his place.”

“There is nothing to forgive!” Miss Darcy assured, though her sweet temperament did nothing to placate me. I looked to the colonel for the truth.

“You need not fret. In this, your cousin and my aunt are well matched. She, too, often forgets her place. Especially when it comes to the private affairs of her nephews and nieces. My primary motive in revealing to Mr Collins my connexion to his parish was to ascertain whether he was aware of the engagement.”

“He is not known for his intelligence, but I should think he could not be so obtuse as to be unaware of such current events as that when he is staying in the same home as one of the betrothed. I am quite certain my cousin is aware of my engagement to Mr Darcy, as it was necessitated by the same event that brought forth his own betrothal.”

“Richard!” cried Miss Darcy. “I must once again apologise for my cousin. He means to tease you by being deliberately obtuse in his speech. He refers to the engagement of my brother and my cousin, Miss de Bourgh.”

Chapter Fourteen



My feet stopped, and I stared ahead at the path before me. What was I to respond to such a revelation? Mr Darcy was apparently already engaged to a cousin! News that might have produced a curious laugh and enquiry only a few short weeks ago instead produced much different emotions.

"It is a match my aunt has fostered and hoped for their entire lives," Colonel Fitzwilliam replied, and with a gentle tug on the arm looped through his, he encouraged me to continue our walk.

"If Mr Darcy has a prior claim on his honour, for certain he must end our understanding."

"He does not, Miss Elizabeth," Miss Darcy replied quickly. "My brother has never wished to marry Anne, and neither has she wished to marry my brother. The presumption was always on my aunt's side."

"I beg your pardon; I am not sure I follow," I said stupidly, my head still racing despite Miss Darcy's comforting assurances.

"From their infancy, my aunt has proclaimed the wish to see Darcy marry her daughter," the colonel explained. "There is no engagement other than in her mind. Though it seems from my discussion with Mr Collins this morning that she has not kept that dream to herself. My aunt had told him that Miss de Bourgh was to marry her cousin, and when I revealed our connexion, he was quite distressed to learn that cousin was Darcy. With your claim on him, your cousin was concerned that you might have usurped the coveted role of his wife, to the everlasting displeasure of Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

"If I have, it was not consciously done! Indeed, neither of us was conscious much of the time!" I cringed at my poor excuse for wit and the nerves that prompted my flippant reply. I swallowed down the list of running questions that could not be answered at this time and sombrely added, "I do not wish to displease any of Mr Darcy's relations."

This time it was the colonel who halted our forward progress. "Be at ease, Miss Elizabeth. As Darcy will be the first to attest, my aunt has a greater ability to cause megrims than does a blow to the head. My purpose in speaking to your cousin was to make it clear to him that he was not to speak to my aunt of either Darcy's condition or his

engagement to you."

"Why would you wish to keep your aunt from knowing what must, at some point or another, be told to all?"

"First, let us address his injuries. If Lady Catherine were to learn of them, I have no doubt she would come haring up here from Kent to cause havoc like nothing this lucky town has ever seen before. She would offer unsolicited medical advice, of which she has no real knowledge. Browbeat the servants for improper care, for certainly if my cousin has not regained his sight, it must be due to some negligence on their part. And worst of all, demand Darcy take up the engagement to Anne with all due haste."

"It would not be a restful environment for my brother."

"And if she were to learn of your engagement, well—"

"She might do all the same things with little regard to your reputation," Miss Darcy replied before her cousin could. Her serious expression looked much like her brother's. "It is best that she not learn of events here in Hertfordshire until it is too late to change them."

I protested, "I cannot like taking part in any deceit, and neither, for that matter, would Mr Darcy."

The colonel replied, with a laugh, "You are mistaken there, Miss Elizabeth. Darcy will wholeheartedly agree that my aunt need not be any better informed than she is at present. My father and mother know of the accident and were in agreement before we came to Hertfordshire that my aunt's branch of the family should continue in ignorance. It is not a matter of deceit, you see, but omission."

"I would not put such trust in my cousin as you do. He is most devoted to Lady Catherine, and I cannot see him agreeing to speak nothing of this to her now that he knows the significance."

"That is where his lovely bride-to-be has come in handy. You see, as we were persuading Mr Collins of the merits of not distressing my aunt with the news, nor hindering Darcy's recovery by prompting her to come to Netherfield, I happened to also mention that Darcy's other relation is an archbishop near Matlock."

Colonel Fitzwilliam affected a nonchalant mien as he re-enacted his words to my cousin, "'By the by, should you ever wish for a more profitable preferment than Hunsford, Mr Collins, you might apply to Darcy to speak to his uncle.' Miss Bingley's interest in that statement was clear. Before we took our leave to call on Longbourn, she had rebuked him three times for even thinking of writing to his patroness about the accident and your betrothal. It is true, Mr Collins alone would not garner much confidence from me, but Miss Bingley has him under her thumb, and the man is helpless to her. Miss Bingley, now, she is one I can trust to do her part."

As amusing as it was to picture this combined assault upon my

cousin, no less managed by Miss Bingley's participation, I still could not feel at ease.

"What a right mess!"

"You need not fret, dearest cousin-to-be, for if Darcy were here, he would tell you he does not wish to marry our cousin."

That did not also mean that Mr Darcy wished to marry me. Though I was beginning to understand the reason for Colonel Fitzwilliam's interview with my cousin. If this aunt of his was everything Mr Collins had described, I had no trouble believing she would be detrimental to my betrothed's recovery. In this, at least, I could feel some measure of ease. Nothing ought to occur that would hinder Mr Darcy's chance of recovering fully.

"I shall trust your judgment on the matter, Colonel, as no doubt you and Miss Darcy know the particulars and parties involved much better than I."

He indicated his thanks with a nod. "It was a useful morning, and there is nothing I like more than being of use in such a way."

Of all the astonishing things revealed thus far on our walk, the most disconcerting was feeling how my heart stuttered at hearing that Mr Darcy might be bound to another. Miss Darcy's gentle voice broke through my thoughts, and I turned to her, attempting to give her my full attention.

"I did not have the pleasure of speaking much with you yesterday, Miss Elizabeth." She paused to look to her cousin, who nodded his encouragement. "So I was eager to follow Fitzwilliam's wishes and visit today, despite his absence."

What a sweet creature Miss Darcy was, and her timely change of topic was much appreciated. I felt a rush of affection for her such that I had not anticipated. I had never given much thought to what my future family would be when I married, but felt now that I would be fortunate in my new sister. I released the colonel's arm, and circled around to take up hers.

"You are very kind to do so. And I assure you, I am very pleased with the notion of becoming better acquainted with you as well."

"You…that is…Fitzwilliam has said you have four sisters. I hope that you will not mind another."

I laughed openly and contentedly, pleased to do so after our previous discussion. "Not in the least, I assure you. Something you must learn about sisters is that you can never have too many."

Miss Darcy chuckled quietly, amused at my absurdity. "My brother said that you were very kind and I would like you. I am pleased to find his estimation accurate, as always."

We stopped at the crest of the hill, and Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped aside and pulled out a spy glass from the breast pocket of his greatcoat

to survey the land around us. His distraction was a comfort because I was sure I could not hide the confusion, and perhaps pleasure, I felt at hearing this from Miss Darcy.

"I imagine the news of his accident was surprise enough. I am sorry for the shock you must have endured, Miss Darcy. But then to come to Netherfield with concern for your brother only to hear some strange lady was soon to be your sister as a result of it. You have my pity."

I laughed and Miss Darcy smiled. "I knew of you long before coming to Netherfield, Miss Elizabeth. My brother often wrote of you. Did you really walk three miles to visit Miss Bennet?"

I coloured to think that this sweet creature might have interpreted her brother's censure of my actions as praise. Still, I could not dwell long on this, for in truth I was astonished to have even garnered a line or two in his missives.

"You must not believe a word your brother says about me if we are to be true sisters. He is not apt to paint me in any flattering light." I could not help but laugh. "But I must admit—for there are witnesses who will surely out me if I were to dissemble—I did indeed walk the distance to see Jane. But when you know her better, you will see that the inducement was well worth the effort. She is very dear to me."

Miss Darcy turned the same enigmatic expression on me as her brother often did. I could not tell in that moment what she was thinking, but I was struck, amused at the similarities in their faces. It would seem it was a family trait.

"Miss Elizabeth." Something about the way she said my name, for she spoke without any of her usual tentativeness, brought my eyes to hers. "My brother wrote about you in only the most glowing of terms."

"Indeed, for he wrote to me too."

Colonel Fitzwilliam appeared quite unexpectedly near us. While Miss Darcy looked at him with pleasure at his confirmation of her statement, he steadily looked at me with a raised brow. It was a disquieting look, one that I dared not try to interpret. Nervously, I was first to break eye contact.

Looking at Miss Darcy, I leaned in to press her hand. "No doubt he had his reasons—and who is ever to understand the mind of a man—but I am glad he expressed himself as you say. Especially if it has made you more amenable to having a new sister thrust upon you."

"My brother is fortunate, Miss Elizabeth, and I am too."

"Well then, if you do not feel I have pushed the bounds of propriety too much already by openly admitting to a troubling habit of walking great distances out of doors, might I push that boundary a little further and request that you call me Elizabeth, or even Lizzy, as

my sisters do?"

Miss Darcy blushed at my request but not without pleasure. I worried I had embarrassed her, but she soon smiled brightly at me and agreed, requesting the same privilege.

I was happy to oblige. "It is only right, being sisters, that we are familiar with each other."

We turned to walk back when I saw Jane and her companion nearing the crest of the hill on the other side. Figuring a little more time alone might do the trick, I encouraged my companions to walk ahead with me. We spoke of the colonel's travels and some of his amusing military stories, and Georgiana described her home at Pemberley for some time and in such a way that I longed to see it. Miss Bingley had often praised it, but I had no notion as to how much of her praise could be believed given her tendency to flatter Mr Darcy.

By the time we returned to the gravel drive of my home, I could honestly say I was pleased with these new relations of mine. They were generous and pleasant, eager to please and be pleased. The colonel had a quick wit that foretold many amusing evenings with him near our side. Our side—Mr Darcy's and mine. That would take some getting used to.

I wondered whether it might not have been a bad thing that Mr Darcy was indisposed today, for it had allowed us to become better acquainted without the umbrella of his silence. My future life as a Darcy no longer sounded as lonely as I had first imagined it to be. Immediately, I regretted such an uncharitable thought. Had I not just determined to be a good wife for the man, proving daily that I was grateful for his actions on my behalf? I ought to not take the pleasantness of his relations as compensation for a life with him.

"I do hope your brother is feeling better soon and his exertions yesterday did not overtax him." The sudden notion was troubling. "I do not like thinking his visit yesterday, a duty to my reputation, might have set him back in his recovery."

"He perhaps might have wished today that he had listened to the physician's orders and remained at Netherfield another se'nnight. However, he was quite adamant that he would brook no more delay."

Colonel Fitzwilliam's words were a surprise to me. I had assumed he was permitted to travel, and the troubling feelings increased at the news that Mr Darcy ought to have remained at Netherfield.

"And no doubt, if he is feeling well tomorrow, he will disregard the orders again!" Georgiana said, with an unladylike roll of her eyes to her cousin.

It was the first time Georgiana had come close to any kind of damning estimation of her perfect brother. And I could not even appreciate it, for I was aghast at the thought he might put his health

at risk again. For me!

"He must not do so! Please tell him, he must not."

Colonel Fitzwilliam smiled at my outburst, and another first occurred, for I felt irritation at his cavalier attitude regarding his cousin. Why did he smile at me so for expressing natural and just sentiments?

"My cousin is not an easy man to persuade, Miss Elizabeth. I cannot imagine we could keep him from calling on you if he felt he was well enough to do so."

"That man and his sense of duty! Pardon me, Georgiana, I am just troubled by the thought that he may feel the mistaken need to play the courting suitor and, in so doing, put his recovery at risk."

"I understand, Elizabeth. And I assure you, I agree with you. He ought not to travel, so he can get better."

"Perhaps, Poppet, we might come to a solution that may suit both sides. If Miss Elizabeth will agree to visit Netherfield instead, your brother can convalesce as needed and still be the courting suitor he wishes to be."

I did not like the way Colonel Fitzwilliam mockingly bounced his brows at me over Georgiana's head. Did he forget we had only been introduced the day before, and he believed he could embarrass me with his teasing? I was made of sterner stuff, and he would soon learn it. I willed myself to disregard his insinuation and mistaken notion regarding Mr Darcy's admiration of me and hoped he would believe the pink in my cheeks was a result of the brisk weather.

"That is an excellent idea, Cousin."

Georgiana was so pleased by the idea, I could hardly then protest the scheme.

"You would have to come daily, Miss Elizabeth. I am certain that any less and you will find him at your doorstep with his physician chasing at his heels. Ah, here is Bingley now, I shall just see whether the scheme meets with his approval." Colonel Fitzwilliam eyed the comfortable closeness between my sister and her suitor and winked at me. "I have little doubt he will express objections. Bingley, my good man…"

As soon as Colonel Fitzwilliam had walked the distance to Mr Bingley and my sister, I turned earnestly to his cousin.

"Georgiana, are you not worried that visitors might hinder your brother's recovery just as much as a jolting carriage? You did not wish for your aunt to visit. I fear my coming may not be the solution we seek."

"Oh, no, Elizabeth. It is quite brilliant actually. Your presence is far preferable to Lady Catherine's. And my brother's headaches are such that the bouncing carriage aggravates them. However, even while at

Netherfield, when he has them, he is often able to be in company if it is quiet. I am certain he would find your companionship exactly suited to help him feel better."

While Georgiana continued to elaborate on all the fine aspects of the plan, I worried my lip. I was not entirely convinced my betrothed would wish my company so consistently. If Colonel Fitzwilliam was successful in his discussion with Mr Bingley—and I could easily read from where I stood with Georgiana that he was—then I would have to find a way to ask Mr Darcy his opinion. He had said we needed to have the power of choice. I would happily visit Netherfield if it kept the stubborn gentleman from hindering his recovery. That would be my choice. But if Mr Darcy would rather I not come so often, I would ensure we adhered to this choice of his. My brows lowered in determination, and I did not mind one bit when Colonel Fitzwilliam, turning towards us with a gesture of success, saw it. Georgiana, however, was thrilled, and I allowed myself to smile for her.

Soon her cousin joined us, and together we walked to their waiting carriage. He handed in Georgiana and turned to say his farewells to me.

"Colonel, we have not known each other long, but you will find in me a character just as stubborn as Mr Darcy. I shall not force my company on him to suit either your notions of matchmaking"—my raised brow effectively stopping his attempted protest—"or Mr Darcy's sense of duty to keep up appearances as my suitor."

Of course we both knew matchmaking was needless now, being that I already was engaged to his cousin. But I was also suspicious the military strategist believed his actions might produce something more. What he did not realise was that I could not afford such a risk.

"I hope I have not angered you, my new cousin, but I assure you, this is the better way. Have you no other objection than your belief that my cousin would be indifferent to your company?"

"If I believe Mr Darcy's health would not be hindered by my presence, and he is not desiring it merely to play his part, then I would be pleased to assist his recovery in this way."

Mr Bingley came then, bringing a glowing Jane to my side. He was all jubilant smiles and barely suppressed enthusiasm.

"I appreciate your generous offer, Miss Elizabeth. I assure you that my friend will feel it keenly. You have no idea how he chafes at the doctor's restrictions, and this will allow him to ease the minds of all his dearest friends and family. I thank you."

"My—?"

"Miss Bennet, it was a pleasure to visit Longbourn today. I look forward to seeing you and my new cousin tomorrow," Colonel Fitzwilliam cut in and bowed to my sister, effectively stopping my

chance to ask Mr Bingley what he meant by ‘my’ offer. Jane’s suitor had already turned and entered the carriage by the time I turned fiery eyes away from the colonel.

With feigned sweetness, I said, “I am pleased *my* idea was so well received. Do be certain, Colonel Fitzwilliam, that you take care in its execution. Our actions must reflect true concern for Mr Darcy’s recovery and nothing else.”

“Indeed, Miss Elizabeth…” He turned to enter the carriage but threw a smirk at me over his shoulder. “But perhaps I should call you Elizabeth as we are to be cousins. And you should call me Richard! Well, I bid you a good day, ladies!”

And into the carriage he went before I could even sputter a single word.

I stood there fuming until the carriage rolled away and then plodded my way back to the house. Jane called my name multiple times as she tried to catch up with me. While we divested our coats to the waiting maid, I stomped my feet and groaned.

“Lizzy, what is wrong?”

I paused, trying to form words to describe the irritation I felt at Colonel Fitzwilliam so handily putting out this scheme as my idea and forcing me to act as such. And to think that I had just begun to believe I was fortunate in my new relations. Ha!

Abruptly, I was caught by a bout of unexpected laughter. That weasel had played me aptly. If he had been my brother, he could not have chosen his trick better. I could not even decide whether I admired him for it or was angry about it. What troubled me more was the growing feeling of pleasure that told me I was not as averse to going to Mr Darcy as I ought to be. And my determination to be a dutiful wife had nothing to do with it.

“I hardly know, Jane. I fear I may be gaining some troublesome new relations.” I laughed again and turned to her, noticing the rose in her cheeks and the smile in her eyes. “Jane…how was your walk with Mr Bingley?”

Her face turned resplendent with happiness and her cornflower eyes filled with moisture. “Lizzy, how am I to survive such happiness?”

Chapter Fifteen



It was with supreme effort that I followed Jane to the relative privacy of the morning room before peppering her with my questions. I marvelled at the radiance of her features. My sister had always been the handsomest among us, but the joy within her at this long-desired understanding with Mr Bingley rendered her incomparable in her beauty. My own breast filled with tender affection, and I expressed it as any loving sister might expect as soon as the doors closed behind us.

"Jane! Dearest, most deserving sister! You must tell me every detail and make haste!"

Tears sprung into her luminous eyes, and together we sat comfortably on the sofa. I turned to her, my leg tucking under the other so I could view her entire face. I was eager, pleased, and ready to share in her felicity.

"Lizzy, he is the very best of men. I had known I was in love with him before your accident; however, I could not have even guessed the depth of my regard would increase upon seeing his manner in the aftermath of it."

"I confess, for what I have witnessed of Mr Bingley, I am quite content with the picture of your future life with him."

Jane's smile reached her eyes, pressing them to release a single happy tear to roll down her cheek. I reached immediately to wipe it away with my hand, resting my palm against my sister's silken skin. After a moment, though, despite the warmth of sisterly affection between us, I could countenance no more delays.

"Now, Sister, how did such a long-desired event finally come about? I had hoped my using our mother's particular talent today in her stead would produce some desired results."

"Lizzy!" Jane laughed. "You are too much."

"I suppose I shall have to thank Mama for her excellent example now, little though I appreciate it when she is at home."

"Yes, I believe we both owe a bit of gratitude to her. Indeed, it was not long after we departed on our walk that Charles, wondering where the rest of our party was, discovered we were quite some distance ahead."

I laughed, giving Jane an obvious expression of triumph. Shaking her head good-naturedly at me, she continued.

"He was most gentlemanly and asked whether I would like to wait for you to catch up or turn back and join you and Mr Darcy's relations. Lizzy, you may censure me for my boldness for I told Charles I was content to continue our walk."

"I shall do no such thing! Well done, Jane. I am pleased to hear you asserted yourself, and I daresay it was not an unhappy communication to your walking companion."

Despite her heated cheeks, Jane explained that she and Mr Bingley walked on, and at first they were silent until soon her companion could no longer remain so. He expressed his love for her in such words that my sister's eyes were once again filled with tears at the recall of them.

So this is what it looked like to have your every happiness secured for a lifetime with the other half of your soul. I listened contentedly and without envy for my sister's happiness. On occasion an errant thought of my own future would intrude, nevertheless, I did not allow it any power over me. Mr Darcy and my future marriage to him had already demanded more of my mind than I wished. Jane's happiness filled every gap of my own, and for her, I could not have been more pleased.

"Then it is complete, Jane. He is well suited to you, and I have no reservations giving you my hearty congratulations and blessing."

We embraced, and Jane, drawing back slightly, met my eyes with earnest concern.

"I believe you too can be happy with Mr Darcy. Charles and I have often spoken of it. We have both expressed a surprise for not having seen how compatible the two of you are before now. Please take no offence, Lizzy. Of course I would have wished for you to love the man you marry first, but I do think it likely that you could come to love your betrothed after marriage just the same."

I attempted to speak then, but the words caught in my throat. It was just as well, for I was uncertain what they might have been. I knew little of my future husband and had already determined to not allow the dark doubts that lingered like smoke in the recesses of my heart to rule the way I interacted with him. I was beginning to believe that at the very least we could get on as friends in this forced marriage of ours. Love, that was another aspect I dared not even consider. It was fraught with perils greater than we had faced buried in the earth! Although his relations had indicated Mr Darcy did not look at me to find fault as I had always believed, I could not make the leap that his sentiments towards me could ever amount to the depths of real love. Nothing like my sister and her suitor, to be sure.

Still, I could not leave Jane's heartfelt hope unanswered, and in time, with no small effort on my part to regulate my tone, I replied, "I admit I am less worried for my future with Mr Darcy than I might have said a few weeks ago, even days ago. Your faith in my future happiness is a source of encouragement for me, Jane. I can only promise to try to be as open to happiness as the gentleman is. Will that satisfy?"

"Yes, Sister, it is enough."

Our embrace spoke volumes of our affection. It served also as a pointed punctuation on the changes that we would both be facing ere long. It was indeed a comfort to know that Jane would no longer be subjected to our mother's humiliations, but would instead be blessed with the affections of a good man. I was furthermore pleased for myself; Mr Bingley being a dear friend to my own future spouse meant that I would never be long away from her.

"I must say, Jane, Mr Bingley has shown a pleasing sort of decisiveness since the collapse, which gives me great comfort to know he is not so amiable as to be easily taken advantage of."

Jane agreed wholeheartedly. She could see no fault in her suitor prior to the accident, but found the way he acted so promptly in organising the rescue, asserting control over his sister's reputation, and stepping into a reversal of roles with his dear friend—wherein he was the adviser instead of the advised—to be vastly attractive. Mr Bingley could never be the commanding leader that his friend naturally was, but his action left an impression that he was both amiable and capable in stressful situations.

Together, we spoke of the value of such a trait in one's future spouse and speculated, as sisters often do, on the other pleasing traits that were now hers to discover, with the added allowances that would be made now that she and Mr Bingley had an understanding. I thought briefly of Mr Darcy's wish for me to know him better. If the choice of marriage partners was no longer mine to make, I felt a measure of peace to know that Mr Darcy did not wish me to be a stranger any more than I would wish him to be.

"Charles suggested he come with his carriage tomorrow morning to escort us to Netherfield and speak to our father when he arrives. I cannot thank you enough, Sister, for the idea that we ease Mr Darcy's recovery by going to him. It was an unexpected answer to a concern of mine. On our walk, after Charles declared himself, he suggested I might like a tour of Netherfield, and I did not wish to appear too eager. He loves me, and I him, but just the same, with the way our mother always spoke so unguardedly… You understand, do you not, Lizzy? I could not accept readily, though I wished to."

How handily Colonel Fitzwilliam had cornered me with his

falsehood. I contemplated how quickly all involved were to show favour for the plan and praise me for it. He would be pleased to know how little I could protest it now. I just hoped he did not lead Mr Darcy to believe that I had suggested it. It ought not to have mattered to me whether Mr Darcy thought I was a little bit mercenary as we, neither of us, had any choice but to marry. Still, a part of me loathed the very idea that he might think so meanly of me.

"I am to have another visitor then?"

We both turned abruptly to the voice at the door. Our father was standing there with a glint in his eye. Jane stood, gracefully smoothed her gown, and glided to Papa, pulling one of his hands into hers.

She brought it to her lips, and with a quick kiss and an affectionate squeeze, she implored, "Papa, please be kind to him. I love him very much and have already accepted his hand."

My father escorted my sister back to her seat as he took up a nearby chair. "With such a pretty entreaty, Jane, I have no choice but to go easy on your suitor. I am pleased to see you so joyful. No, I shall have to content myself with the efforts employed with Lizzy's betrothed instead."

"Papa! Please tell me you did not make mischief with Mr Darcy!"

"And what if I did, Lizzy? Why should you care whether I gave your intended a bit of trouble when he came asking for your hand?"

I sputtered. Indeed, why should I be bothered by it? I ought to have found amusement at the thought of my prideful future husband bested by my father's playful way.

"It is only…well, he is blind!"

My father merely lifted an eyebrow at my protest. "That will make some aspects of your future life difficult, but it ought to have no bearing on whether or not he would be good to you. If I was required to accept the man for your reputation, I was certainly going to make it clear to him how I expect him to treat you."

For some reason, his words only furthered my flustered state, and my cheeks warmed with embarrassment—and visions of Mr Darcy in his role as my husband. Jane, detecting my state, implored our father to not tease me.

"Be at ease, Lizzy. Although your suitor did not at first enjoy my prodding, he soon got the better of me and expressed himself with a determination that could not but satisfy. I think, daughter dearest, you have met your match with that gentleman of yours."

I wanted to protest again. Mr Darcy was not mine. Yet the chagrin of realising he was, and more so than I had even begun to realise, only increased the blood rushing to my cheeks.

"He will not have an easy time of it, but I am convinced a man like Mr Darcy is not persuaded against his goals once he has decided upon

them. You will give him a merry little ride, my Lizzybear."

He stood then and placed a swift kiss on my cheek, a chuckle in his throat. He told Jane he would be pleased to see Mr Bingley in the morning. I remained lost in thought while they communicated the details of our day at Netherfield, set for after Mr Bingley's interview. What could he mean by saying that Mr Darcy was determined upon a goal? Their interview ought to have had one purpose and one alone. Once my hand was secured, and my reputation with it, what could Mr Darcy have left to want? And what did it mean that my father seemed to approve of the gentleman so readily when I was certain Papa had many reservations on the match, no matter its necessity?

"It is well you will both be away from home tomorrow, girls. I came to tell you that your mother and sisters have written and plan to return on the morrow. It seems that Lydia was made unhappy to hear from Miss Maria Lucas of the regiment's arrival, and she beseeched your mother to return so she might not lose any more of their time in the area. I did hope to extend to you both a greater holiday, but seeing as you are nearly recovered, Lizzy, I could not very well suggest an alteration of their plans."

Jane replied, "Thank you, Papa. We shall be glad to see them again."

She was more of a saint than I, for glad was not the sentiment I felt. Terror might more accurately capture my thoughts on the news. For the first time since Colonel Fitzwilliam spun his little web of lies, I was relieved. I shuddered at the thought of Mr Darcy being subjected to my mother's vulgarity. We could not change the fact that we would marry. The imagined sight of his disgust, increased with daily reminders in the form of my mother, was unendurable a thought at present. To Netherfield I would go, to spare Mr Darcy and myself that mortification.

Chapter Sixteen



The wind blew past us in a gust of frigid air as we descended from Mr Bingley's carriage at Netherfield. I shivered, pulling my green cloak closer about me. The weather was certainly pushing autumn along now, dragging leaves along the gravel drive like yellow and orange fairies frolicking on the ground.

A few swirled around our skirts and settled at our feet for a breath of rest before being picked up and pushed along the pebbles again. I momentarily watched a cluster of them distractedly as they turned and changed directions as if dancing. Their haphazard journey towards the lawn beyond the drive was both disjointed and purposeful. All of a sudden, I felt inclined to rescue one of the blustering leaves. Ever since the accident I had felt like those leaves: swept about along a path, confusingly disjointed and swift, with no security to hold me in place or assure me the journey would end some place peaceful. At the same time, it often felt as though my future fate was purposeful and set, even without a single action on my part to direct it in any direction I might choose.

Abruptly, I chased after the cluster of leaves, stepping with haste towards their path to the verdant grass beyond. The cluster landed softly, pausing in temporary safety against a tuft of grass. Before they could be swept up again in their fateful path to some place against a shrub or rock, I reached down and captured several of them in my brown kid gloves.

I stared at them unseeingly, wondering whether or not I had done them a service to pluck them from their disjointed journey. Jane's voice near my shoulder pulled me from my silly speculation.

"Those are pretty, Lizzy, but let us go in. The wind is quite biting, is it not?"

I looked up at her and smiled. Mr Bingley stood beside her with a polite nod of admiration for my collection. Beyond them, Mr Collins was already eagerly climbing the steps to the door without his host.

"They are quite captivating; I wished to see them closer. Forgive me for keeping you both in the cold like this. Let us go in."

Together we turned to retrace my path along the drive back to the steps to Netherfield's entrance. I looked down at the leaves in my

hand, intending to let them continue on the wind's destined path for them, but I could not release them. Instead, I tucked them in the pocket of my cloak and followed my sister and Mr Bingley up the steps and through the doors, open like a mouth ready to swallow me up.

I could not account for the strange flutter in the pace of my heart. All had been settled with Mr Darcy; therefore, there ought not to be any awkward conversations today. I was simply there to partake of tea and ensure that the gentleman knew he need not consent to his cousin's schemes.

When we were finally out of the cold, I decided to hand only my gloves and bonnet to the footman for storage; my cloak was a soft one and the chill of the air without had not yet retreated from the entryway. Jane, too, kept her cloak, promising Mr Bingley she would tell him if she became too warm later.

I had not spared much thought for Mr Collins during our ride to Netherfield. Clearly, he was pleased to have the use of Mr Bingley's carriage as he had previously chosen to daily walk the distance to Miss Bingley's residence. It was a testament to the state of my mind that this news surprised me. I had given little thought as to how he got to Netherfield, only pleased that he did so and we were spared his company. Jane and I shared astonished glances during the ride that our cousin would exert himself physically to such a degree. True, Mr Bingley often sent him home in his carriage, a kindness that did not go without expressions of gratitude by Mr Collins no less than a half a dozen times during the brief ride to Netherfield this morning.

Now that we were inside and nearing the parlour, I realised I had once again thought little of my cousin as I heard his voice greeting Miss Bingley in a way that was singularly mortifying. He had not waited on Mr Bingley or a footman to show him the way, but had scurried ahead without us. Our delay meant that as we entered the room, we were just in time to see the superior look bestowed on Mr Collins by his betrothed as he bowed low in front of her. This was one aspect, one humiliation, I had not given due consideration. My eyes searched for Mr Darcy in the room and found him standing by himself some little distance from the rest of the occupants. I shuddered to consider what he must think of my relations, for Mr Collins could not be more excessive in his praise and pleasure in greeting his future wife.

If Mr Darcy felt anything, it was his alone to know, for his face gave nothing away. I squared my shoulders and proceeded further into the room. Holding my head high, I accepted the warm greetings of Georgiana and spared a polite smile for her mischief-making cousin. With little time at all, I was soon presented before my future spouse

and found myself placing my hand in his extended one.

He bowed over our hands and, with the slightest of tugs, asked whether I wished to seat myself near him. I nodded and then belatedly spoke my agreement aloud for his benefit as I positioned myself on the sofa near him. Mr Darcy stood a moment longer, head cocked to me, listening until I settled before seating himself much closer to me than I had anticipated.

My heart raced with the movement of the springs beneath us and the warmth of his leg near mine. Discreetly, I attempted to shift to the side, speaking to Georgiana who still stood near us.

"Will you not join us?"

I nearly gasped in surprise to feel my wrist secured in Mr Darcy's warm hand. No doubt my fidgeting told his keen ears the location of my hands at my knees. His palm slid down around my thumb to capture my hand in his.

"You are very welcome, Sister, if you wish," Mr Darcy said, as if holding my hand in company was an everyday occurrence. "Richard may procure you a chair."

My ability to speak was lost to me. I could easily see that shock was not the sentiment our companions expressed at Mr Darcy's forwardness, but rather, pleasure.

Miss Darcy leant over her brother to place a kiss at his cheek before taking up her cousin's arm. "I know you wish to speak to Elizabeth, so I shall return to my sewing box across the room for a time. But see here, Brother, you will have to share her at some point."

Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed, Mr Darcy smiled broadly, and I quivered, still attuned to the little pinpricks of sensation alive at every point where our skin touched. Suddenly, I regretted not leaving my cloak with my bonnet, for I was now becoming quite warm. Mr Darcy's relations walked away, and we were left in silence.

I wished to pull my hand from his. I had not anticipated he would be demonstrative and, indeed, relied on the fact that Mr Darcy had always seemed to be a reserved man. Eyeing the way he held determinedly to my hand, I could almost laugh. At least he did not seem to notice the awkward praises emanating from my cousin as he fussed over his bride on the sofa.

I had just reached a point where I could nearly push the sensations in my hand out of my mind when he spoke, giving my fingers a gentle squeeze.

"You are very quiet this morning, Elizabeth. Will you not even offer a greeting?"

It required no less than three swallows to clear my throat.

"Good morning, sir."

Mr Darcy's brow twitched, and he turned his head towards me. His eyes were searching, though they were projected slightly off had he been trying to see me.

"Thank you for coming."

He spoke the words so sincerely and so quietly that I almost thought they had come from someone else. If it had not been for his crisp northern accent, I might have looked behind me.

"Mr Darcy, sir, you must know that you need not have me daily. I am pleased to do my part to see that you do not needlessly suffer, but you do have a choice."

"I need not have you?"

"Well, you take my meaning, surely…of course I do not mean our marriage, only my visits… You do not need to exert yourself so often on my part."

To my surprise, Mr Darcy chuckled, low and delicious, at my side. At first I was captured by its sound as it tickled my ear, then I was unsure as to its cause. I wracked my brain for what might amuse the gentleman so and could not come to any conclusion. My curiosity turned to frustration, for if he was mocking me for simply giving him a choice as he had suggested we do, then he could just—

Cutting off my fevered thoughts was Mr Darcy's hand abandoning my fingers and pushing softly down upon my knee, holding it still. All my temper was, in an instant, balled up and pressed into a pit in my belly, low and distracting.

"What have I done now to deserve your ire, Elizabeth? You must help a poor man out; I cannot see at what point I offended you."

"You laughed at me, sir!" I mustered with as much of that anger as I could.

"Ahh, then I apologise." Mr Darcy's fingers slid, leaving fiery paths, off my knee to capture my hand once again. "I did not laugh at you, Elizabeth, only the notion that your visit, and indeed any future ones, might be unwelcome to me."

I had too many questions and no coherent way to decide with which one to lead. Eventually, I bit my lip and blurted, "What has you so altered? Is it the accident, a result of the blow to your head?"

Mr Darcy sat upright, taken aback by my forthright enquiry. "I beg your pardon. You may need to clarify your meaning. I had not thought I was."

With my free hand, I reached up to my neck and pulled at the short curl at its nape. I continued to play nervously with it while I considered how to word my explanation. It would behove us both not to quarrel, but to find some kind of common understanding if we were ever to have any hopes of a contented marriage. Yet how was I tell the man sitting next to me, rubbing infuriating and distracting circles in

the palm of my hand, that he was the most arrogant, terse individual of my acquaintance before a rock hit him about the head and made him pleasant? The thought of speaking so candidly produced a laugh from me and eased my nerves. Letting go of the curl at my neck, I rested my other hand again on my lap.

"And now, my dear, you are laughing at me."

"No, no. It is only I was thinking of how to answer you." *Ignore his endearment, Lizzy, it is surely part of the head injury!*

"Perhaps you might mention something that you find different about me. I am curious to know your thoughts as well as to understand whether there is truly something off about me. Perhaps it would be wise to summon the doctor to hear you. I have heard those with injuries to the head are the last to know when they are altered."

I could detect from the tone of his voice that he was becoming troubled at the thought. I imagined that alongside his lost sight, the idea of having his personality altered would be a source of extreme unease. Quickly, I placed my other hand atop his at my lap, wishing to settle him.

"I do not mean to suggest that there may be further concerns for the physician. Please rest easy on that account. It is only that…"

I paused, looking down at our hands and marvelling at how natural they looked intertwined. His large square fingers gently wrapped around my tapered, smaller hands. His skin was slightly more tanned, no small surprise as I knew him to be a gentleman of sport, yet the contrast with my paler skin was all the more mesmerising. Abruptly, I remembered we were not alone and looked up in embarrassment to see what of our position was being observed. With relief, I saw that all other parties of the room were in their own private discussions. Our sofa was tucked somewhat safely behind most of the other seating in the room.

Mr Collins and Miss Bingley looked strange with their heads together as they were. Mr Bingley and Jane, less so, as I knew of their sentiments towards each other. And Colonel Fitzwilliam and Georgiana were equally ensconced in a whispered discussion. Georgiana glanced back at me and her eyes sparkled, forcing me to smile at her sweetness.

I looked at my companion and saw his brows pinched in frustration. Remembering he was waiting on my explanation, I resolved to put words to my thoughts.

"I only wonder whether it is the inevitability of our situation that makes you less…averse to it."

"Do you refer to our marriage? The inevitability that we shall wed?"

I knew that Mr Darcy could not see my cheeks but instinct had me

tipping my head down to hide the blush from him.

"Yes."

"Have I given you indication that I am averse to it? Elizabeth, you know that I would not have left you to face the consequences of that day without me."

"And I thank you for your honour, sir. I am not expressing myself well. Would it be acceptable if I am a little frank with you, Mr Darcy?"

"I would relish any chance to see inside your head, Elizabeth."

"You see, sir, that is just it! You are so provoking now; you say such things that I feel as if I am speaking sometimes to a different person than the Mr Darcy I knew before the accident. Indeed, that gentleman hardly spoke at all unless intending to amaze the whole room!"

Mr Darcy hummed to himself, so quiet for a minute that I was certain I had offended him. But just as my apology was lapping at my lips, he turned to face me a little more. His abrupt movements were graceful and clumsy at the same time, such as when his leg brushed quite unavoidably against mine.

"If I am to rightly understand you, I speak differently now."

I sighed; it seemed a little more frankness was necessary. I sent a silent prayer above for both patience and success. "You generally speak *more* and the things you say are a little disquieting. Not in a way that offends; rather, they are…kind."

"Surely you do not expect that I would be otherwise to my betrothed!"

Mr Darcy pulled his hands from mine abruptly. Not painfully, but still I felt a shock at the swiftness of their removal. Awkwardly, I folded my own hands on each other, feeling every bit as though they ought to have some occupation, but with what, I knew not.

"No, please forgive me. I did not mean to suggest such a thing."

We were silent for a minute, long enough to hear the floating sounds of whispers around the room press into the too-quiet air surrounding us.

"Mr Darcy, would you not agree that before the accident, we were often at odds? We have not had many moments of charity in our acquaintance. Indeed, I believe you once accused me of wilfully misunderstanding you."

I feared the day could not be saved with how long it took for my companion to respond.

"I had not ever considered us at odds, Elizabeth. Rather, I found the liveliness of your mind drew me into any number of fascinating and engaging discussions."

"Oh." That was a revelation of sorts. Discussions? Surely, we were

at times bordering on uncivil.

“I see your father was correct.”

This distracted me sufficiently. I questioned him but received no further clarity.

“No matter, I shall tell you one day. But let us continue our previous topic. I believe I may have hit upon a little of your meaning. Perhaps you might clarify more, so I can be sure without further misunderstanding.”

I found myself pulling at the short length of the curl at my nape again as I explained in as careful and halting tones as I could.

“It only seems, sir, that perhaps knowing we must marry has made you less inclined to quarrel with me and more apt to speak—”

“‘Provokingly’, I believe that is how you described it, yes? Perhaps you might tell me what you consider ‘provoking’.”

“Well, how about when you said you wished to see inside my head? To be quite honest, it made me blush, sir, and it is unlike the way you used to argue with me.”

Mr Darcy rubbed his jaw with one hand, making sounds deep in his throat. With the other hand he reached out to me in clear invitation. I looked about, and seeing all were still engaged in their own discussions, I eyed him as I placed my hand in his. I saw that the moment our hands touched, there was a softness about his eyes.

“This too,” I said, lifting our entwined hands, “is a little unexpected.”

Chapter Seventeen



Mr Darcy turned his head as if to look at our hands, though of course he could not see them.

"I believe I begin to understand you now, Elizabeth."

"Will you tell me the reason for the difference? Is it simply that we are to be married and you wish to act as betrothed couples do?"

It took every ounce of my bravery to speak so boldly, and I was pleased to feel my feigned confidence hid my trepidation.

"I shall tell you someday. Will you allow me to share only a few reasons at present and trust me to explain myself fully at some later date?"

"Certainly. Are you becoming fatigued then? I ought to have thought of that."

"No, it is not that." Mr Darcy began the lazy circles in my palm with his fingers again, and thankfully, he could *not* see inside my mind, for I would have been mortified for him to know how wonderful it felt.

"To some degree, your intelligence has concluded rightly. I am a little altered by the experience. I imagine we both are changed in our outlook a little from that day. You are also correct that I am settled with the knowledge that we shall marry. It is not, perhaps, as it ought to be—I would not have wished to have robbed you of your choice. But since that is not an option, a little of my ease in your company might come from knowing, as you say, that our marriage is inevitable."

He pulled my hand over to rest upon his lap, reverently enveloping it with both of his. The room heated several degrees and was overly warm now. I could not say it was entirely due to my cloak.

"In other ways, you have seen our acquaintance quite differently from me, and to this, I must own the fault. I found you lively and engaging, enjoyed our discussions, and had not at any time felt as though we were at odds. Rather, I feared at times that I was perhaps too friendly with you."

I could not help it, and I scoffed at this notion. "I cannot see how you might have been less friendly!"

Immediately, I regretted my candid outburst, his fingers ceased

their roving exploration of my hand. Mr Darcy had, since the accident, been unceasingly civil, and to my shame, I could not say I acted with equal consideration. After a time, his fingers moved again, and I released a breath I did not know I had been holding.

"Another fault of mine. Please accept my apology. I saw our interactions differently and obviously without clarity."

"I accept your apology if you will forgive me my part. I was more often impolite than not. It behoves us both to move past our earlier interactions and make the best of our new situation. And so I must thank you for the kindness and openness you have displayed towards the 'inevitability' of our circumstances. When I think of all the differing ways you might have treated this obligation, I can only be thankful that you do not treat it with the aversion that I expect most men would upon having a marriage forced upon them."

I felt Mr Darcy tense beside me, and I could tell that I had upset him somehow. I worked through what I said and could not discover what might have been the source of it.

"I do not like the word obligation," he said, almost as if he could read my mind. "Yes, the results of that day did require that we marry. But I have never thought of this consequence as an obligation and shall never see you as such. Furthermore, I have felt many things regarding the prospect of marrying you, and aversion has never counted among them."

I studied him then, from his stern brow to his clenched jaw. I could not say I totally felt worthy of such a generous reply, but I was thankful for it nevertheless and said as much.

"Please do not thank me for treating you with the respect and consideration you deserve as my future wife," he said softly but with fervour. "Elizabeth, it is clear I have not presented myself to my best in the past. I should like that you see this side of me as the more accurate version. I cannot see your countenance or the flash of emotion that so often sparks in your fine eyes, much to my everlasting displeasure. But perhaps it is well enough for how little I accurately read your feelings from them in the past. If I am provoking, as you say, please understand, I am trying to see the world through new eyes. Eyes that in some ways are clearer and, in other ways, just as blind as they once were."

The room was altogether too warm now. His words were heady in the air and wrapped around me, pressing into me in a perplexing manner. I could not escape them, nor could I feel I could make sense of them. Mr Darcy was much more than I had ever expected him to be, and while I could not say that this newer, more charming side of him was not a result of his head injury, just the same, I could not help but find it attractive and pleasing. I felt I could be in some danger

from this gentleman by my side, especially if he was, as he suggested, showing a more accurate version of himself than he had before the accident. All these thoughts swirled around beside Mr Darcy's words, mixing together and flustering me. Questions abounded but none louder than these: What reasons did he have for the change, and when would he explain them to me?

I shivered in quiet contemplation of all we had discussed, amazed at the depth of the conversation while within company.

My companion's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "Elizabeth, are you cold? I ought to have asked whether you wished to be seated nearer the fire."

I laughed, for it felt as if I had not been this warm in my whole life. "Not at all, sir. I am quite the opposite actually. I need to take my cloak off, for I have warmed sufficiently from our journey here."

Mr Darcy released my hand, and with shaking fingers, I untied the string at my neck and pulled the cloak from about my shoulders. I felt his hands find the fabric behind me and pull it away to fold on the space at his other side.

His hand rested on the fabric and I could tell he was trying to picture it. For some reason this moment of familiarity was endearing, and I spoke up to help him.

"It is not a new cloak, but new to me, and you will not have seen it before. Aunt Gardiner gave it to me at the end of last winter, and I have not had a chance to wear it until now. It is made of green wool, edged in a little brown fur at the neck. It is long, perhaps a little too long for my stature, and I realised this morning that I ought to have altered it before wearing it, but I was a little eager to make use of it for the first time."

Mr Darcy turned his face towards me and smiled widely. He was pleased to have me describe it for him, and I flushed with happiness.

"I am not wearing a bonnet now, like when we last met, sir. But perhaps you expected that, given we are indoors."

"No, it is helpful information for my mental designs. And I could not have known for sure; you are often an unconventional lady."

"Take care, sir, if you wish me to continue to help you see the world around you that you do not insult the lens which you have to employ to do so."

"Believe me when I say that being an unconventional lady is intended as a compliment."

I pressed my lips together, my eyes casting down to my lap to hide the way his words made me feel. It was silly. I knew he could not see me, yet it gave me a measure of safety to do so.

"Well, then. Shall I carry on?"

"Please, Elizabeth, paint my world."

This time when he reached his hand out to me, I did not hesitate to give him mine. I suppose you could say I was getting accustomed to the feel of his hand and it was quite tolerable.

"My sister and your friend are charmingly placed on the yellow settee across the room near the windows. The sunlight is streaming in at their backs, and the lightness of both their hair halos them. It suits their amiable and angelic dispositions."

I went on to describe the rest of the party, their occupations and attitudes. At times, I confess, I relished in a little bit of impertinence, for the first time doing so in my descriptions of something, Mr Darcy laughed contentedly and with pure delight. The sound was such that I felt compelled to prompt it again, and every time I was successful, it made my heart jump a little, falling afterwards in that intoxicating manner that makes one feel a little disconnected from their body.

By necessity, I, on occasion, directed his vision one way or another to show him where he might place persons or objects. If this required me to gently nudge the firm edge of his jaw or lean into him slightly, it was simply part of the service I was providing and nothing more.

We paused now and then to discuss one portion or another, with Mr Darcy asking questions where he needed more description to complete his mind's-eye image. In the instance of Miss Bingley and Mr Collins, therein began an interesting exchange of unexpected observances—some from overheard conversations of my cousin's prior visits and some from the things I was seeing.

Indeed, the manner of their interaction was a little disturbing yet fascinating. She seemed full of disdain for her betrothed, belittling him subtly at times. And Mr Collins, fool that he was, seemed to relish in the abuse, becoming even more obsequious in accordance with the amount of incivility from Miss Bingley. Yet there was a turn of her countenance now and then that seemed to indicate she liked his fawning. It was all quite interesting, made more so by the secret exchange of thoughts between Mr Darcy and myself on the topic. Who would have thought I would enjoy such conversational intimacy with him?

"Oh, goodness! What a mess." I pulled my hand from Mr Darcy's warm ones, and left the sofa to pick up the scattered leaves on the carpet before us.

"What is it?"

Mr Darcy leant forward, obviously wishing to be of some service but clearly unable to.

"You will think it silly. It is only some autumn leaves I collected outside when we arrived. They were in my cloak pocket and must have fallen about the floor when I removed it."

Mr Darcy sat back and patted the seat beside himself again. I eyed

the space, noting the ample room to seat myself just a little further away from him this time. I could not explain my actions except to say that if Mr Darcy needed me to describe the room around him, it would be best that I did not become hoarse having to speak louder for him to hear me. So I resumed my previous place nearest to him. It was not a matter of being close enough to once again indulge in the pleasurable aspect of holding his hand. I was a rational creature and thought only of the added comfort of a close proximity with regard to communication. Totally unrelated, I observed that Mr Darcy's soap had an appealing scent to it.

I held the leaves in my hands and looked down on them, grateful Mr Darcy could not see the redness in my cheeks.

"What do the leaves look like, and why did you gather them?"

He spoke softly, as if these leaves and their provenance were more interesting to him than anything else I had described around him.

"I saw the wind blowing them, and they looked…well, I wished to rescue them from the wind."

"Were they in need of rescuing?"

I eyed him, thinking at first he was making a mockery of me. But his brow was lowered in earnest regard. While I was retrieving the leaves from the floor, he had shifted in his seat, his arm, I now noticed, was laid across the back of the sofa behind me. Suddenly the curl at my neck itched, and I reached to pull at it. I jumped a little when my hand brushed against the sinewy strength of his forearm.

"Elizabeth," his voice seemed lower, hoarse.

"They are some brown, one red, but mostly yellow and orange. They are a little damp, not quite crisp yet, so they are still soft and pliable." I spoke quickly, my voice pitched higher than normal.

He did not respond for a minute. It felt as if it were a hundred.

"Are your eyes open, Elizabeth?"

Startled by his shift in conversation, I replied automatically. "Of course, sir."

He looked at me, and I felt pulled into his gaze. I wished in that moment that he could see me, but could not explain why.

Slowly, I felt his hand slip from the sofa behind and, soft as butterfly wing kisses, brush from my shoulder to the nape of my neck to that curl that even now was tingling my scalp. My hands twitched, wishing to pull at it again, when his fingers enclosed around it, and I held very still.

His fingers pressed the curl between them and fairies danced along my scalp at the feeling. I could feel my breath become shallow, yet I held too still to accommodate the needs of my lungs.

He leaned towards me then, never letting go of my hair.

"This little minx has been a source of torture for me for a very long

time, Elizabeth. You tend to worry it when you are nervous or thinking. It always made me wish to worry it too."

The remaining air in my lungs rushed out with a whoosh, and I drew in deeply. He paused, holding himself stiff like a statue.

"Forgive me, I did not ask for this liberty. If I make you uncomfortable, please tell me."

I turned my head to look at him, amazed at the courage it took for me to do so. With the movement, the lock of hair was pulled from his fingers and they landed with searing heat upon my neck briefly before he flexed them, breaking the contact, and held still once more.

"You may if you wish." My throat felt so dry, I might have welcomed the servant's entrance with the tea cart, no matter how much it would have ended our quiet interlude. I was astonished at my boldness. I was becoming rather weak when it came to Mr Darcy. The way he spoke of me, of wishing to know my thoughts and of recalling his own from times past, it all combined to make me susceptible to any wish of his and my desire to fulfil it.

To his credit, he did not further my embarrassment with comment, but simply wrapped the little lock around his finger again in a gentle caress.

"While you are being generous, might I importune you further and ask whether I may have one of your leaf treasures?"

I looked down at the forgotten foliage in my hands. I nodded, and he, feeling the movement, lifted his other hand to receive it. I picked the red leaf; it was my favourite, and I did not take the time to consider why I selected it before placing it in his palm. He slid his fingers along the leaf to feel its texture and then carefully put it in his breast pocket with a quiet thanks.

After a time, he leant near me again and said, "You have described the room in its entirety except for one thing."

"What is that?" I replied, a smile on my lips at the playful tone in his voice. It was a relief to hear after the husky whispered tones of the last few minutes.

"Your dress, Elizabeth?"

Warmth stole through my centre as I described the plain yellow gown I wore, adding to it some little memory of when I first purchased it. All the while, my companion sat next to me, a smile about his lips that I had often seen directed at me before the accident. His finger carefully twisting and wrapping itself around the little lock of hair at my neck. I had never felt so interesting, so captivating, to anyone before as I did sitting much too close to my future husband, being pointedly ignored by the rest of the room. And his continued attention to that lock of hair? That was the most maddening thing I had ever experienced, for it caused the rest of my locks to wish for a

turn as well.

Chapter Eighteen



The return of my mother and sisters from London marked a decided change in the tone of the home. Gone was the tranquillity of the weeks past where reason abounded and intelligent conversation could be expected. Now, I often felt each room carried with it a collection of emotions stirring about frantically, the mixture differing depending on the occupants of the room.

My mother's was the most outspoken opinion in any space. She was at times thrilled beyond measure at the news of Jane's betrothal, smug with the belief she had foreseen it, and certain she was critical to its coming about. At other times she was darkly hostile to our clergyman houseguest, employing a coldness that thankfully he was not often around to notice, nor possessed of the intellect to recognise, had he been present. To my mother, his honourable offer to Miss Bingley was in fact an insult to her daughters and the future he might have—nay, ought to have—given to one of them. It mattered little how often or how reasonably Jane and I tried to help her see the necessity of that union. Mama was nothing if not single-minded with regard to the matrimonial prospects of her daughters. Besides, she simply did not like the thought that one day Miss Bingley might take her place as mistress of Longbourn.

And what of my own betrothal to Mr Darcy? Unexpectedly, my mother was entirely silent on that matter except to admonish me to set a date and make the event happen lest he gain his sight again and decamp. To her, his actions were to our benefit entirely. Mr Darcy was nothing but a rich future husband to her least favourite daughter. As pleased as she was that I was to marry—a feat she had long lost hope of my ever accomplishing, and to a wealthy gentleman at that—she had not changed her former ill opinion of my betrothed. Ironically enough, she imagined Mr Darcy was not very bright, for it was he who shackled himself to me by choosing to protect my life from imminent danger at the ruins. I might have hoped that my mother was grateful for Mr Darcy's actions, seeing as the result prevented my death, but to me, it seemed only that she thought his actions foolish and impulsive. However, if such a rich man wished to be foolish and impulsive, at least he had the decency to do it so that one of her daughters might

benefit.

I was not wrong in my fear that my mother would be a source of exasperation and humiliation to me. Her tactlessness often had me holding my breath and my temper, a prayer of gratitude sent heavenward that Mr Darcy's health prevented any visits to Longbourn.

Excepting the first time, my mother did not accompany us to Netherfield, which was my only source of comfort with her return. I had honestly expected she might make the parlours of Mr Bingley's home her permanent daily habitat, but thankfully, that was not the case. My younger sisters often walked to Meryton, hoping to spy the soldiers about, and my mother most often accompanied them. Still more common, she left them to their shopping and flirting and visited with my aunt Philips for gossip and gloating. She took every opportunity to jaunt about the countryside, calling upon her friends to revel in the good fortune of not one but two forthcoming nuptials for the Bennets. She did not require the presence of those daughters, enjoying more of the direct attention for their absence, especially since she might tell how often we were asked to Netherfield for the day.

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The day my mother accompanied us to Netherfield was in truth a day I would rather forget. Mr Darcy sat beside me as had become our habit, though this time he did not reach for my hand. Each time he winced with the sharp outbursts of sound that my mother and younger sisters produced, I felt it. Much to my compounding horror, and despite multiple explanations as to the manner of Mr Darcy's limitations, when my mother chose to speak to him, she spoke loudly and slowly as if he were hard of hearing. At length, before my relations could take their leave, Mr Darcy bent towards his sister on his other side and whispered to her.

I was not surprised to have him next lean closer to me to say, "Forgive me, Elizabeth. The pains in my head are severe today. I fear I must desert you for a lie down."

If I had not become attuned to the little movements in the area around his eyes, I might have been hurt at his excuse to leave the room, avoiding my mother and sisters' impropriety with it. Nevertheless, there was a pinch about his eyes that cooled my tongue, and I wished him a restful afternoon.

Mr Darcy stood then, his sister at his side, and bowed in the general direction of my boisterous relations and excused himself with sombre tones. It was well that he could not see, for whatever little affection Mr Darcy might have developed for me due to our situation,

he would not have been happy to see the scowl my mother directed at me upon his departure.

"What have you done to scare Mr Darcy away now, Lizzy!" she hissed at me. Her volume was just loud enough that I felt certain, by the studied quiet of Colonel Fitzwilliam nearby, he had heard well enough what ought not to have been said in public.

I wished immediately to tell my mother that Mr Darcy was suffering one of his megrims, but knew it would change nothing to her. Instead, I was near to tears with gratitude for Mr Bingley, who at that moment directed my mother's attention his way with a question about her holiday in London. Therein, the rest of the visit was spent listening to the latest styles she had witnessed, the shops she had frequented, and the other diverting aspects of London.

When Georgiana later returned, after my mother and sisters had taken their leave, I took the opportunity to further my intimacy with my new sister. The effort was sufficient to clear the earlier visit from my mind. We had a pleasant afternoon together. Georgiana sweetly requested I play the pianoforte for her and I could not help but be flattered when she recalled a desire to hear me, first instilled in her when her brother wrote to her in London of his pleasure in it. My soon-to-be sister was kind in her praise and seemed genuinely delighted with my mediocre musical efforts. It took much more to persuade her to play for me, her natural hesitancy endearing. Georgiana's performance was superior in every way, and I told her as much. She blushed with embarrassment, and I determined that one day my new sister would not be fearful of displaying such an astounding accomplishment.

It was not until we were gathering our cloaks to depart late in the afternoon that I was reminded of the morning's earlier humiliation with my mother. It was when Colonel Fitzwilliam bid me goodbye.

"It is a pity that my cousin could not enjoy the pleasure of your musical afternoon with Georgiana. I would wager it is an afternoon he has pictured before. Oh well, it is of no use reflecting on what could not have been. I knew the moment I saw him this morning that he was already suffering but was determined to be present for your visit."

Colonel Fitzwilliam's words cooled the pressure building in my chest. It was unnecessary for him to reveal that Mr Darcy was already doing poorly before my relations added to our numbers, but the knowledge was powerfully reassuring. I could not entirely erase the mortification of my mother's behaviour nor the knowledge that her shrieks added to my intended's discomfort, but perhaps realising he was likely already in need of a rest did ease a little of that sting.

"Please give my best wishes for a healthful rest to Mr Darcy."

The colonel nodded and bowed to me, allowing Mr Bingley to

hand me up into the carriage beside my sister for our return home.

In the following ten days, I noticed Mr Darcy rarely afforded himself the luxury of any rest, often stubbornly remaining present during the entirety of my visits despite the pinch about his eyes towards the end of them. On two occasions, I found it necessary to force him to bed when it was obvious to me and his relations that his suffering was severe.

On those occasions Mr Darcy was not without his own successes. He learned quickly that bargaining with me over health measures could be a profitable business. He was often able to persuade me to read softly to him in the quiet solitude of the library rather than insist he retire to his chambers. Nevertheless, one hour of reading alone with me was the agreed-upon value for the stubborn gentleman's concession to spending the remainder of his afternoon resting above stairs.

On one memorable afternoon my voice lured my intended into the sleep he ought to have succumbed to in his bed. I sat with him for over an hour, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest. I told myself then that I ought to leave him to rest in private, but I was forestalled by the boyish look of his face in repose.

How my reading could have been at all restful, I know not; my voice was not soothing, not with its cadence and pitch often disrupted when my patient captured that sensitive curl by my neck or ran playful fingers along my nape, sending maddening tingles down the length of my spine.

I likewise found that because Mr Darcy's recovery necessitated quiet, we were often afforded generous chaperonage, or at times no chaperonage at all. Perhaps all knew, due to the circumstances of our union, it was unlikely any real impropriety would occur. For goodness' sake, Mr Darcy had nearly announced to Meryton at large that I was not tempting to him.

His desire to be near me was puzzling, though I admit, a little gratifying. I often wondered whether having me near was reassuring to him, given that the moment he woke after the accident, I was there beside him in our earthen tomb. However, Mr Darcy seemed distracted as often as not. He dwelled within his own thoughts while busy unsettling mine and making me lose my spot in the book with his touch at my neck. No, I could not believe my presence brought him actual pleasure. A comfort, perhaps, was all I was then, and given the lasting consequence of his actions on my behalf, I could be honest enough to say it was the least I could offer him.

The London physician soon was required to return to his practice in town, but he left my betrothed with the firm belief that when the headaches ceased and his brain healed, Mr Darcy would regain his

sight. I was at times angry with the medical man for constantly projecting that hope at us like incessant waves on the sea sand. I could not see how a blow to the back of the head might have anything to do with the working of the eyes, but I kept my lips together and did not allow others to see my doubts. I could only feel that by giving Mr Darcy that hope, he was preventing him from settling into his new reality.

I could tell that Mr Darcy did hold on to that hope, and on occasion even relied upon it. There were times when I could see he was well enough physically, but in spirits he was poorly. It was on those days that Mr Darcy seemed more like the man I knew before the accident, prone to long moments of brooding silence and abrupt answers to simple enquiries.

I could not help my feelings then. For many days, I had begun to feel a small measure of anticipation for a kind of happiness with Mr Darcy. In spending time with him, I found him pleasant, for the most part. He was still on occasion 'provoking' in his words, and I could now admit that by provoking, I really meant flirtatious. His playfulness at times was bewildering, but promised a future of laughter and contentment. However, when he would fall into spells of brooding, I was plucked abruptly from that brighter future into a reality where I was promised to a man who would not have made me his choice had he been given one. I was too far below his notice for that.

After one such afternoon of alternating between perverse irritation at Mr Darcy's moods and self-pity at my future with such a one, I arrived at my home and abruptly intruded upon my father's solitude.

"I wish I did not have to marry that gentleman!"

My father looked up from his book with brows lifted high, slowly removing his spectacles and lowering his book to his lap. He placed a scrap of parchment to mark his spot, as he responded to my outburst with infuriating calm.

"Please come in, Lizzy. Make yourself comfortable."

"Papa, he is…he is a changeling!"

"Indeed, well that is concerning, to be sure. I had thought him only a man."

"A boorish, proud, and presuming man, perhaps!"

My father sighed, and I wanted to stomp my foot at his prevailing calm, this perverse non-reaction to my frustration.

"Come, my girl. I shall not listen to you if you are going to harangue me, but if you can settle yourself to some degree of sense, I shall be happy to hear your complaints."

My arms were folded around me in tense resistance. It felt good to dispel some pent-up emotion. I had held myself in check for some

weeks now at this future that was thrown down upon me when the earth itself turned upside down. I had behaved with aplomb and measured acceptance. I had certainly tried to make the best of my fate. It was only reasonable that I was allowed a moment to shake the bars jailing me to a future I had not asked for.

In the end, exhaustion prevailed, and I collapsed inelegantly into the chair beside him with a sigh.

"Now that is better. List for me all of your complaints, Lizzy, and I shall see what I can do to appease them."

"And you will not mock me?"

"I shall not."

I eyed him, suspicious still, despite the solemnity in his eyes.

"Mr Darcy is at times an intelligent companion, speaking eloquently of a number of interesting topics, and then at other times he is arrogantly silent and disdainful of the company around him to the point that he hardly participates in any conversation."

"Go on," my father said, resting his head in his hand on the arm of the chair.

"He is uncivil and rude, yet on occasion excessively attentive, almost affectionate. I cannot make out whether I am a nuisance to him or quite the opposite."

"What else?" His calm once again made me a little exasperated.

"Well, he is handsome and distracting and surprising and handsome!"

I nearly leapt out of the chair to leave when I saw my father's smirk. He sobered quickly, hiding it and imploring me with a gesture to settle again.

"Well, Lizzy, you do have a difficult conundrum before you. I can well see why you would be upset by it. In short, you are being forced to marry a man, and a handsome man I am told, more pity to you."

I groaned, clenching my teeth together. I could hardly say whether I was more angered with my father for mocking me when he had promised not to or with myself for revealing one of the greater sources of my discontent about my future marriage to Mr Darcy. I found him quite captivatingly handsome. Oh, how I wanted to rant at that truth. Of course, Mr Darcy had always been a well-favoured gentleman, but then his features had little connexion to my own happiness, and likewise, he was frequently marring them with an ugly tendency towards arrogance. Before the accident, I found myself largely immune to their effects. But over the course of the last several weeks, I had seen glimpses of a pleasant Mr Darcy and now was irrevocably tied to him for the rest of my life. Both of those factors slashed at any resistance I had to his pleasing features.

I could not now push that immunity back into place for the sake of

my sanity. So I was indeed destined to marry a handsome man who could employ that allurement over me with swift accuracy should he ever learn of my weakness to it, and worse, who was at times profoundly irritating.

I channelled the helplessness into a scowl at my father.

He raised his hands in surrender. “Lizzy, did you think that you would marry a man who was always in a gracious mood, who was pleasant and happy and never experienced irascibility?”

I folded my arms and refused to answer. How could my father sound so reasonable at the moment and not allow me to wail at him over this.

He tried again, his tone imbued with greater patience. I wanted to grind my teeth but was perversely affected by his steady tone, and I found myself calming.

“I did not like that you had no choice in your future partner; however, I found Mr Darcy to be surprisingly well matched to you. I admit it brought me a great deal of comfort in having to resign you to him once I learned a little of his character. But, Lizzy, he is only a man. Is he not allowed moments of petulance and ill temper, such as you are now experiencing?”

“How can you say you know his character after only one interview?” I responded, fully aware of the sulky tone of my voice, purposely ignoring the hypocrisy he pointed out in my behaviour. I was beginning to feel a little foolish in my anger.

“It was an enlightening interview. I had not expected it to be such, yet it revealed to me that any concerns I had over the match were unnecessary.”

Curiosity and a hungry need propelled me upright and leaning towards my father then. What could Mr Darcy have said to reassure my father in so short a time?

“Tell me then, Papa, what makes you such a champion for Mr Darcy? What could he have said to you?”

Papa just stood, patting my shoulder in a way that I knew meant he would keep his secrets. “I daresay you are beginning to learn of it yourself, Lizzy. You need only prevent yourself from being blind to it.”

“Blind! Ha, I am not the one blind.” I felt the shame of my childlike outburst the moment my eyes met with my father’s. “I apologise, that was not kind. Yet I cannot help but acknowledge the fear behind that statement. I am worried about caring for a man who may never be independent and who cannot see me. Who might not even know the faces of his children.”

My cheeks pinked at the inevitability of being a mother, of carrying a child of his. The act required to produce such an outcome was itself a source of mixed emotions. Despite the whispered

conversations I had heard between my mother and her friends on the subject of the marriage bed, I had always hoped it was more an act of love. That the vague reassurances my aunt Gardiner had given me were the rightful way to see marital relations. Did I really think it was possible to be happy, truly married, to someone who could not find me tolerable and might actually bless his lack of sight when it came to that?

"I cannot say I wish to know your current thoughts, Lizzy, but let me at least address your words. You are rightly anxious about marrying Mr Darcy with his current disability. You may own that sentiment, for it is a just one. However, do you think you are the only one allowed to feel that disconcerting worry?"

"Of course, Papa, I would understand without hesitation that you would be concerned too. I am your daughter; it is natural that you should likewise be troubled."

My father raised his brow at me, and I found his expression puzzling. That is until the incredulity in his features pressed upon me with such force as to physically knock me back into the cushions of the chair. How selfish and presuming I had been to think that Mr Darcy having moments of ill temper had to do with his being forced to marry me rather than his blindness. But how must he feel about the possibility of never knowing the faces of his children? Had he not spoken of how infuriating it was for him on the day he proposed?

With shame, I recalled how he had said, '*There are things I cannot imagine doing without the ability to see. There are things that are agonising to contemplate never seeing again*.' Yet I had allowed myself to assume his black feelings were merely unpleasant aspects of his character. A man, my father had called him. A human with varying emotions. How vexingly reasonable it now seemed to me to realise that, yes, Mr Darcy was allowed on occasion to be in a poor mood—and perhaps with more reason than I!

At the moment, I felt all the littleness of my earlier pet. With new eyes, I saw that despite having ample reason to mope and rage against his limitations, Mr Darcy had more often than not acted resigned, determinedly pleasant, and hopeful. I could now no longer resent his physician for bolstering that optimism. I only fervently prayed that the hope he fostered might soon be proved worthy of his faith.

"Perhaps, despite the many hours you and Jane spend at Netherfield, you are not using your time to its best."

It was the closest thing to a paternal reprimand he had ever given me. I felt all the weight of it as I considered how proud I had been in my interactions with Mr Darcy since becoming betrothed. I had often told myself how good I was to decide to treat him well despite how poorly he had treated others. To care for him as proof of my gratitude

for his actions rather than because he was a person worthy of being cared for. I had worked strenuously to resist any allure he had, ignore the reactions to his touch that skipped up and down my body with each pulse, banish any admirable side of him, all so that I might not fall in love with him. I told myself it was for my own protection, but I realised now, in my pride, it was so that I might maintain myself in a position of superiority over him. For loving meant giving of oneself regardless of what might be returned to you.

I looked at my father, certain that at least a little of what I was realising could be discerned in my eyes. He returned to me with a small, brown, leather-bound book, placing it in my hands, dust and all.

"You would do well, my girl, to give Mr Darcy a little chance. I think you may be surprised at how well-suited you really are. He might not have begun this acquaintance by giving you the best of first impressions, but I daresay he has learned that lesson and is suffering all the more for it. You might give your betrothed a little patience now and then, and allow him both to be human and to redeem himself."

Chagrined, I smiled at my father, acknowledging his wise words. I looked down at the book he had given me and frowned at the unfamiliarity. Opening it, I found it was an herbal-healing compilation. The book's appeal tripled as I flipped through the rough sketches of differing plants and brief descriptions of their usefulness. I had spent hours looking everywhere for this, wondering whether I was remembering it to be one of my uncle's books instead, and had determined to write him about it.

"Thank you, Papa!" I said, and then pausing to catch his eye, added, "For everything."

"I have been known now and then to have a little wisdom. Bring it here, Lizzy, and let us see whether that old book might have something useful in it. A friend of mine at Cambridge gave it to me when he cleaned out his rooms. I admit, I have never much looked into it."

Together we paged through the small book. I had no such illusion that I might find a cure for Mr Darcy's blindness, but perhaps there was something to help his megrims and give him a greater measure of comfort.

It was not long before I was taking out a sheet of parchment and writing a letter to my uncle, hoping he might have connexions among his import and export acquaintances. And I shall admit, for the first time in many days, I felt more at peace inside, more myself, than I had ever hoped to feel again.

Chapter Nineteen



I endeavoured honestly to follow the advice of my father over the course of the next few weeks. I set out every time we called at Netherfield, which was nearly every day, to approach Mr Darcy with the allowances I might give a new friend. I exerted as much patience as I was able, which was not always particularly admirable when my betrothed would irritate me with his behaviour. In time I began to discern a pattern to his moods. Often they were related to his new situation. Mr Darcy had, as far as I was able to perceive, never been ill or required so much assistance. I believe he did not mind any aid from myself, but at times I detected a growing tempest within at the black night in which he was forced to live. His manners were almost always without fault, though I could tell he railed at being so dependent on others. He was gracious and thankful whenever I would pour his tea, procure him a plate, or perform any of those little duties one is expected to do for their betrothed. Yet there were other times, I am ashamed to say, when I may have taken my nursing too far.

Once I had seen a spot of custard remaining near the edge of Mr Darcy's mouth and without thinking of what embarrassment I might cause him, I reached up with my finger, brushing against the spot and the side of his lip, cleaning away the remaining treat. Mr Darcy stiffened at my actions, his cheeks ruddy and brow furrowed. I apologised immediately, taken aback by the flames lighting in the dark depths of his unfocused eyes. He was not some invalid old man, and I had treated him as such.

I expected to be chastised despite him never having done so before, and in anticipation, found my shoulders tense and my natural defences rise. However, when the gentleman did speak, after manfully swallowing his ire—I know for I watched mesmerised at the movement above his cravat—his voice was pitched low and trembled with strong emotion.

"Elizabeth."

My name was all he said, and I felt all the humiliation he could wish with the censure. Although I was embarrassed, I lifted my chin in my defence and explained I had not meant to discomfit him, only to clear away the custard. I acknowledged that I ought to have told him

about it and allowed him to clean it himself, and I would in the future be mindful of such boundaries.

Mr Darcy's thunderous expression grew more displeased, and then oddly crestfallen. Even though he clearly had found my actions disconcerting, he was gracious with me and excused my actions, even thanking me.

I spent the rest of that afternoon bewildered at the man. Although he had thanked me for my attention to him—despite clearly being unsettled by it—he continued to occasionally reach up and brush his fingers carefully across that spot by his lips as if inspecting whether I had done a good enough job of it! Maddening, puzzling man!

Despite these baffling moments wherein I struggled with the reality of a future with a man I could not always make out, I was beginning to truly enjoy my time with my betrothed. He was intelligent, a fact I had previously known but had not allowed myself to appreciate. His wit was sharp, and now and again, I was even delighted to detect a dry humour from him.

On occasion my father accompanied us to Netherfield, which I found to be a balm of comfort. For on those times when Mr Darcy would infuriate me with his terse replies, I was able to glare at my father as if to say, "See!" I might have found my father's silent laughing responses enough to wish him away except for the interesting way that he and Mr Darcy interacted at times.

I often felt that I did not understand some context in their conversation even though Mr Darcy's answers to my father's enquiries were varied. At times he was amused; at other times he clearly did not wish to pursue the topic.

What was the subject so frequently broached between the two that left me feeling I was missing some pertinent clue? Fishing. My father would ask about Mr Darcy's recent successes at angling. What bait was he using, and did he find it successful at luring in his catch? Frequently, I would attempt to hush my father, impertinent though it was for a daughter to admonish her parent. How could he be so cruel as to speak of a sport that was impossible for Mr Darcy to pursue at the moment? It seemed a mockery, yet Mr Darcy appeared amused by it, though quite often also flustered.

"My biggest difficulty at present, Mr Bennet, is keeping her on the hook. As soon as I feel as though I might be near to my goal, something will go awry and the catch swims away again."

On this occasion I had enough of being outside the conversation, but still more, I felt some pressing concerns regarding it as well.

"Forgive me, gentlemen, for the interruption, however I must ask you, Mr Darcy, whether your physician knows you have taken up sport again? I understand it is a sedate sort of activity—though that is

very much the end of my knowledge of it—nevertheless, I must protest you exerting yourself when it may not be to your benefit!"

My father laughed at my speech, which only added fuel to my justified concern. I turned expectantly to my betrothed, hoping for a reasonable answer.

He smiled at me then, almost amused like my father, though there was a softness around his eyes that was not mocking. "I thank you for your concern, Elizabeth. I promise all my activities are for my ultimate well-being."

He then pulled my hand from where it had rested in his on the sofa between us and lifted it to his lips to kiss. My face was flaming, my eyes darting to where my father sat nearby. Relieved he did not seem unhappy with Mr Darcy's attentions, I was still more than a little shocked to see Papa wink at me!

My father slapped his hands upon his knees and stood to take his leave. "Well, sir, from my view, I do not think you will be long in finding the right lure to that elusive fish of yours. Keep casting out, my boy."

Mr Darcy was holding back a smile, and he nodded to acknowledge both the advice and the endearment. For myself, I was more than a little surprised by my father's warmth to him, and again I pondered what might have passed between them when Mr Darcy asked for my hand.

For some days thereafter, the weather prevented any travel between our houses. Although I had become accustomed to daily visits and time with Mr Darcy, I could not help but feel a little relief when I awoke to several inches of fresh white snow. Jane and I spent the day with our sisters playing in the snow, pressing the fresh, powdery delight together in an attempt to form some creature, only to see it crumble apart due to the dryness of it. I felt as though I had not laughed so thoroughly in weeks, and it was refreshing to my soul. There was no puzzling gentleman to surprise me with his moods and no disconcerting touches or attentions to feel twitchy about. At one point even my father came out to laugh at our antics, declaring us all the silliest girls in England. Lydia tossed a half-formed snowball at his chest only to have it break apart on the journey. With wind-brushed cheeks and bracing breaths, we followed our father inside, eager for the hearth and the hot chocolate Hill would bring us soon enough.

The days away felt a cleansing lungful to my thoughts as the changes ahead of me weighed heavily. I found these changes at times exhilarating but also oppressive. Having such a holiday from it all brought a measure of peace to my soul.

Such calm was not equally afforded to all of my family party. There were some among us who felt most ill-used by Mother Nature's

winter wonderland. Mr Collins was restless and unhappy for each day we were confined to Longbourn. He was exceedingly morose, sometimes fretful, for the insult his absence must be to Miss Bingley. It was a source of amusement for Jane and me, who had witnessed the odious man's attentions to his betrothed border on the excessive. I smiled at the thought that Miss Bingley and I might be, for the first time in our acquaintance, feeling similarly to one another.

Mr Collins, in his haste to attend to his bride at the earliest possible moment, nearly pushed my renewed spirits to their breaking point. He was impatient, obnoxious, and irritating as he encouraged us to break our fast with swiftness. The roads were once again passable, and Papa had given us leave to use the carriage.

Instead of listening to Mr Collins's complaint about the speed of our groom navigating the pits in the road, I smiled out the carriage window. I saw, just as we were leaving the drive, a group of soldiers approaching Longbourn, and thought to myself how glad I was to be heading to the quiet of Netherfield instead of enduring my younger sisters' flirting.

When we at last arrived at Netherfield, Charles nearly bounded down the steps to welcome us. I was pleased to see how well such action affected my sister's beautiful countenance. She blossomed and radiated joy at her betrothed and my high spirits lifted still further. I turned to make my way up the stairs, watching as my cousin skipped —with greater agility then I had expected possible for him—up the stairs and in search of Miss Bingley. I smiled to myself, well humoured at the couples surrounding me and feeling a small measure of eager anticipation for seeing my own Mr Darcy.

My own Mr Darcy.

The thought stopped me in my ascent, and I smiled to think how, improbable though it was, the sentiment was both odd and right.

We were met inside the corridor by Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam, dressed for travel. The surprise of seeing them on the verge of taking their leave was great. I had not known they had plans to depart and was a little sad to see them go. Colonel Fitzwilliam explained that he was obliged to report in with his commanding officer, and knowing he would be but a day or two, was entreated by Georgiana to take her along so she might finish a bit of her Christmas shopping in town. I had not realised how dear to me Georgiana had become, and seeing her daily was a pleasure that I had not expected to soon end. Colonel Fitzwilliam was another matter. I found him diverting to be sure, but at the same time, I did not always like the too-probing looks he cast my way. He had an uncanny ability to catch me at my most vulnerable, and I felt as if he read my thoughts far too clearly at times.

“I am sorry to see you go, but delighted you will return so soon.”

“The recent weather has prompted the trip. I knew I would need to see the major general before the Advent season but planned to make the trip a little later, presumably when Darcy was in a more certain state. This way I can take care of any business I need to, Georgiana can do her shopping, and I am commissioned by Darcy on an errand or two. When we return, we may stay as long as we wish.”

“Well then, I wish you both a safe and quick journey to town and back. Georgiana, you will be much missed.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed at my obvious neglect of similar sentiments to him, knowing by now my tendency towards teasing. Charles and Jane likewise said their farewells, and Mr Darcy’s relations took their leave.

As we proceeded into the parlour, I felt a pulsing in my chest in anticipation of seeing Mr Darcy. It was a sort of jolting surprise to feel such, and I realised all the more how well-needed the wintery holiday had been for my spirits. Here I was refreshed and ready to please and be pleased by my betrothed.

If only he were present!

It was but a moment before I discerned that Mr Darcy was not among the occupants of the room. Mrs Hurst was there, playing with her dangling bracelets, alone with her husband snoozing beside her. Miss Bingley and Mr Collins were absent, though little could I bring myself to care much about them.

Charles turned to me, catching a glimpse of my expression.

“Is Mr Darcy unwell today?” I asked, hiding the disappointment in my voice.

“Forgive me, Elizabeth,” he said, and I smiled at his self-conscious use of my name. Since his engagement to my sister, I had given him leave to use it as my new brother, however his modesty often found him a little shy in its application. “Allow me to escort you to the library. I believe Miss Darcy was visiting with him there before you arrived.”

He took his leave of Jane with a press of her hand and began walking with me out of the room. His gallantry in escorting me was an unnecessary kindness; as often as I found my own way to the library, it was now a familiar part of the house. My new brother’s motives were soon revealed though, for he asked my opinion on his gift for Jane for the forthcoming festive season. We were smiling and pleasantly speaking on this favourite topic of ours—Jane—when we were both abruptly silenced by the scene before us.

Having turned the corner down a corridor leading to the library, we were nearly past a small alcove when a brief glance into it caused me to gasp in shock. Charles, hearing it, turned to see what might be

the cause. Before our eyes, in the not-quite-private space of the alcove, was the unwelcome and wholly unsettling discovery of Mr Collins and Miss Bingley engaged in an amorous and quite heated display of affection.

I turned my back to them as soon as my wits came to me and bit my lip to suppress the embarrassed laughter bubbling up inside. Shock certainly, and nausea churned as well. Never in my life had I witnessed such behaviour!

"Caroline!" my companion bellowed, forcing me to curl my shoulders inward as a fresh batch of humour assailed me. I heard a gasp, some muffled movements, and a crash of some sort, followed quickly by pieces of a vase scattering past my feet. Oh glory, I could not have held back the tears of laughter nor an unladylike snort, for the final sound reaching my ears was the resounding smack of a slapped cheek.

"Mr Collins! How dare you take liberties with me!" Miss Bingley cried, her voice shaking and feigning outrage.

I heard my cousin mumble, and I dared to look over my shoulder at the guilty parties now that I knew they were no longer otherwise occupied.

"Forgive me, my exquisite pet, I am run away with my feelings."

Miss Bingley's cheeks were flushed, her dress a little askew, and her hair in need of a lady's maid. She caught my eye and hers narrowed.

She returned angry eyes to her betrothed who, by the looks of his own appearance, had not been the aggressor there. Mr Collins seemed all the more moved by her anger, imprudently ignoring her still shocked and outraged brother to instead groan and offer more submissive apologies. Miss Bingley's chin rose, and I saw at once that she was pleased by his grovelling.

It was Charles's stout and impassioned speech that brought the couple's attention back to him. He was speaking of scandal, dishonour, and hasty marriage; however I could no longer keep my countenance and excused myself to quickly manoeuvre around the broken porcelain to the wooden door of the library beyond.

I opened it quickly and shut it behind me, leaning my back against it. It was then that my composure broke and I found myself overcome with amusement. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I could not help but laugh at the absurdity I had just witnessed—and from Miss Bingley! How unforeseen such an encounter was, yet I would not have believed it had I not witnessed it for myself. One of my hands tightly held the door handle while the other rested against the sore muscles of my stomach. Any attempt on my part to regulate and bring about an end to my laughter failed just as spectacularly when bits of stern

voices would waft through the door. Or worse, I would recall the heated look on Miss Bingley's face. One, I was growing certain, that was not entirely formed from being caught.

It was not until a sound nearby brought my attention immediately to its source that my humour subsided. Mr Darcy had stood at my entrance and was trying to make his way towards me. His knee had hit the low table placed near the sofa where he had been seated. I quickly forestalled him, and with a hand to his arm, brought us both back to the sofa.

"What a delightful sound. I love your laughter, Elizabeth. Care to share with me the source of your amusement?"

I certainly had every intention of sharing the shocking discovery I had just made, for Mr Darcy and I had often discussed privately the strange compatibility between Miss Bingley and my cousin. However, simply thinking of the scene and how I might describe it to my betrothed caused laughter to bubble up through me again.

"I could listen to your laughter for the rest of my days."

Chapter Twenty



Such a speech could not but draw my thoughts away from scenes unpleasant and towards Mr Darcy. Unbidden, the image of the heated embrace between Mr Collins and Miss Bingley that I had witnessed in the hall came back—but the participants were replaced by myself and Mr Darcy. My face was on fire, and all laughter died deep in my throat, leaving it fiery and parched. What illness had infected my mind to imagine such a thing?

"Might I enquire as to the source of your mirth?" he asked again.

He was looking at me with such an interested and eager expression. His full lips were spread into a small smile, all while his eyes darted in small movements around as if trying desperately to conjure up my image. My mind reflected again on the source of my amusement, and I laughed a little at the memory of the shock in Miss Bingley's eyes. She could not have liked my witnessing her lack of propriety. My eyes moved, pulled by some force to Mr Darcy's lips, as I once again was assaulted with the image of the two of us acting with such passion. Curiosity filled me, and on a breath, I leaned forward, closer to those lips, still spread in a small smile. My hand lifted to catch myself against Mr Darcy's chest.

It was his quick intake of air that shattered the glass of unreality in my eyes, and my nearness to him was at once brought to my attention. I leaned back quickly, tucking a lock behind my ear with an uneasy laugh.

"Damn these eyes," my companion said in a low whisper.

"Forgive me, I do not know what came over me just then, Mr Darcy."

"I wish it might again!" He was clearly speaking only to himself but his voice was just loud enough for me to hear it. "You are forgiven, of course, as long as you tell me what it is that had you so delightfully amused. When I heard you enter and then the bewitching sound of your laughter, I could not help but go to you. I wish only that I could have seen the sight also."

There was real regret in his tone, and I was flattered by it. I took up his hand and, seeing how much it pleased him, placed my other hand atop to enfold his.

“There are some advantages to not having sight, sir. What occurred outside this room is a sight I would wish unseen if it were possible.”

Once again, I was amused at my wit, pleased at the jubilant spirits I was in today and a little surprised that being with Mr Darcy had not changed them; if anything he added to them.

“I cannot imagine anything I would wish unseen if I could have my sight again, rather there are quite a lot of things I would wish to commit to memory should I be fortunate enough to regain it.”

I squeezed his hand, wishing to impart my understanding. “Well, sir. I do hate to contradict you, however even you would not wish to be witness to what I have.”

Mr Darcy smiled broadly, reached a hand behind me, and soon I felt the caress at my neck that always followed. I ought to be immune to it, so often and so practiced a move it was for him now. However, it still caused my heart to skip and the nerves of my skin to come alive in a way only he could command.

“Let me be the judge of that, Elizabeth. I would endure much unpleasantness to see your laughter, so let us out with it.”

I turned a little towards him, eager to see how he would react to the scandal I had just witnessed. I was not aware at first how comfortably, how informally, I positioned myself as I began the story. I was caught up in the recounting of it to such a degree, focused solely on the expressions of his face and anticipating the reactions he would have, that I did not take note of how we were seated.

“I swear Charles and I stood a full minute in shock, seeing them engaged like that! And I assure you, from my vantage, they were both eager participants!”

I shuddered through a laugh, triumphant in my predictive abilities when Mr Darcy’s eyes rounded and his face exhibited surprise and then shifted into disbelieving disgust. One arm still rested alongside us on the top of the sofa. I was turned towards him, my one leg tucked under the other and my hand, to my amazement and surprise, was placed inadvertently on Mr Darcy’s knee. In my recounting, I had placed it there, and now Mr Darcy moved his hand to rest atop it. I recognised my relaxed arrangement as one I often employed with Jane when we would talk freely with one another. How differently this felt, how intimate.

Conscious of our positions for the first time, I began to turn forward on the sofa again, pulling my hand carefully off Mr Darcy’s knee. I was surely out of my mind to have forgotten myself so. Before I could fully withdraw, his fingers captured mine to prevent their escape.

“I am sorry you observed such a scene. Though it does confirm some of our observations in a way that somehow gives little

satisfaction for being correct. However, I see you had the right of it earlier. Some things are better left never witnessed."

"Indeed!" I laughed, pulling myself to stand, full of restless energy. Sitting so intimately with Mr Darcy, the warmth of his leg still radiating up my arm, left me feeling off balance. I was far too attracted to the man I would marry. "I assure you, I have no wish to encounter Miss Bingley or my cousin ever again!"

I walked behind the sofa then, pressing gently on his arm when I saw his chagrin at my departure. "Now, Mr Darcy, what shall I read to you today?" I began walking around the room, putting forth suggestions while he attended me from his seated spot. His objections to my offers made me laugh, for they were all absurd.

"What of poetry?" I chuckled to myself, recalling arguing with him about the inefficacy of poetry in bringing about love.

"I dare not risk it," was his impertinent reply.

"I feel almost a desire to ask your meaning, sir. But alas, I come to the next section. How should you like history?"

"Not today, Elizabeth."

"And what, pray tell, have you against history? I observed you preferred that to any other when I came to Netherfield to nurse Jane."

"I did not realise you were so observant of my preferences."

He was being playful, and I was in the mood to indulge him. "Well certainly I observed it. As I observed your disapproval of my appearance the morning I arrived from Longbourn."

"I believe your memory is faulty, Elizabeth. I do not recall disapproval among my thoughts of your appearance that morning."

I walked along, my hand trailing across leather bindings until I reached the window. The ground outside was spotted with patches of snow not yet fully melted.

"If it was not disapproval, it was close enough to it."

"I wonder whether you would believe me if I were to say that on that day, the only coherent thought in my brain upon seeing your warm, pinkened cheeks, chestnut curls blown free of your bonnet, and trim figure, radiant with health, was…far from disapproval. I recall thinking, 'she is exquisite'."

I chuckled uneasily, my heart beating wildly by such a flagrant thing to say. "I hardly believe you could have observed all that with the shocking amount of mud on my skirts." Bitterly, I recalled overhearing Miss Bingley later that day, when she thought I was with Jane, speak of them being six inches deep in it.

"I have been the fool many times over, but I am not so foolish as to think I can safely comment on the condition and appearance of a lady's dress and live to tell about it."

His easy, dry wit brought me into a more comfortable frame of

mind. It was a return to the playfulness of before his warm words, and I was thankful for it.

"Indeed, a good lesson for any gentleman to memorise. By the by, you must never answer me if, in the future, I ask whether my dress does not flatter my figure."

He laughed, and the fullness of it, the rich hot chocolate, warm-down-my-throat kind of quality to it, was a little intoxicating. An involuntary shiver passed up my spine. I walked nearer to him again, standing behind the sofa where he sat. It was almost as if his free amusement drew me to him.

"I promise to remember that, though I hardly think it will be necessary. I cannot imagine there is a dress in England I would not find pleasing on you."

Impulsively, I placed my hand on his head, and ruffled his soft curls, laughing. "Very good, sir. You are well prepared for a successful marriage."

My laughter died softly as the feel of his hair instantly brought me back with vivid acuity to the memory of those curls from our time in the ruins. It reminded me of when I had inspected his head for his injury and placed pressure there with my handkerchief. Mr Darcy had seemed pleased at our exchange before, though he was silent as I was now. My fingers ventured to the back of his head where I expected to feel the bump, but it had long healed.

I withdrew, feeling all the perversity of my actions. Thrice I had forgotten myself around this man and acted without thought. If I were being reasonable, I might have comforted myself with this proof that I was becoming more at ease around my betrothed, but I could not help thinking of Miss Bingley in that moment and wondering how much better I was acting with Mr Darcy. True, we were not behaving so… impetuously, but that meant little when I acknowledged the truth that I enjoyed being so open with him. Other than Jane, there was not a soul in my life with whom I felt as comfortable.

Mr Darcy turned around to me. Neither of us said anything about my breach. It was gentlemanly of him to not mention it, or more deservedly, reprimand me for it.

"Perhaps instead of reading to me, you might just sit with me."

I nodded, then rolled my eyes at myself before saying, "As you wish, sir."

I tentatively stepped around his legs and again placed myself next to him. After a few tense and thick moments of silence, he spoke.

"Earlier, you referred to my friend in such a way… You…well I understand he is to be your brother now."

I marvelled how quickly I was beginning to understand Mr Darcy. He was still an enigma, but sometimes I felt as if I might be able to

finish his thoughts before he spoke them.

"I used his Christian name."

Mr Darcy nodded, and he kept his head lowered as he said, "Might you…do you feel yet as though you could call me by my name, Elizabeth?"

I felt a little ashamed now for waiting as long as I did. It was a privilege I had freely exchanged with Georgiana nearly as soon as I had become engaged to her brother. The colonel made free use of my Christian name, though I did not reciprocate, no matter how often he teased. And as Mr Darcy had so fairly pointed out, Charles and I had done without formalities for some weeks now. Yet I had not granted that same intimacy to my future husband.

"You are correct to request this of me."

"I only wish it if you can be comfortable."

I thought about it, and rolled his name around my tongue. It wound around in my head, and I felt each pass bring more warmth to my cheeks. Although supremely disconcerting, leaving me a little flustered, the concession felt right.

"I should be pleased to call you by your given name…Fitzwilliam."

Heartfelt joy shone quite clearly upon his features, and he brought my hand to his lips for a kiss of thanks. With uncanny accuracy, he reached out and brushed my cheek in a whisper-soft caress. I felt a change in topic necessary, when my thoughts betrayed me once again to examine the curve of his lips with focused attention.

Hesitantly, I began speaking of the weather, finally becoming less discomposed by the sensations skipping along my veins and the feelings drowning me, enough to describe the playful folly my sisters and I engaged in with the snowfall.

He seemed contented in a way I had not often seen in him and genuinely interested in our childish antics. He would on occasion break in with a comment of his own about the snow in Derbyshire, making me curious to see his home. I wondered at when I might have that pleasure, for we had not again broached the topic of a date for our wedding.

At first I did not wish to push it forward, grateful for any opportunity to prolong the inevitable. Only now that I had begun to enjoy my time with Fitzwilliam, I found a small measure of myself eager for that life to begin. I knew he had his reasons for not speaking of a date, but I worried that if he waited until his sight was restored, we may never exchange vows. He attempted to flatter me and make me feel as though he wanted this union, which I think was a kind thing for him to do. It would be prudent for both of us, if we wished to find happiness, to forget the rancour of our previous acquaintance. Though I must admit that a small part of me worried that my

betrothed would one day find himself full of regrets.

Charles interrupted us as he entered the library. His hair was askew as though he had been running his hands through it frequently. He apologised for his interruption, and I was thankful his timing was not a little earlier when my own hands had been running through his friend's hair.

"Elizabeth, I am supremely sorry for what you witnessed an hour ago. It ought not to have happened. Might I hope you have informed Darcy? I should not like to myself, but I would if he is in ignorance of it."

"I know of it, Charles."

"Good, good." Bingley began to pace the room in agitation. Clearly, he had not expected to have such a shocking business to deal with today. "I had thought I ought to go to London tomorrow, Darcy, and procure my sister and Mr Collins a common licence. But I should like your opinion on the matter. The banns have already been read twice for them."

"I hardly know what to advise you. I would not have guessed Miss Bingley and Mr Collins to be so little trusted."

"Precisely!"

"I do not believe, aside from myself and you, that they were observed by any others," I ventured to say. Charles confirmed it, adding only that the maid who cleaned up the vase was told it was knocked over.

"Then, with so short a time before their union, perhaps nothing need be done except a little more effective chaperonage."

Fitzwilliam chuckled, smiling with admiration at me before nodding his agreement in the direction of his friend's voice. Charles seemed to settle with relief. I imagined how little he liked having to leave Jane to procure a licence, let alone explain the reason for the haste when their wedding was set for only a week hence in any case.

Charles, apparently satisfied with the conclusion of such a disconcerting topic, stood, eager to quit the room. "I think I shall just get Jane's opinion, then, if you will both excuse me."

He hardly waited for our replies before leaving the library. Seeing as how he left the door ajar, I began to wonder at our own situation.

"Do you think perhaps we are being unfair to require proper chaperonage for Miss Bingley and Mr Collins when you and I are often left unattended and without any chaperon?"

"Do we need a chaperon, Elizabeth?"

A few weeks ago I might have laughed at such a question. I might have thought Fitzwilliam was even being insulting. However, no matter when he voiced that question, had he said it with the same low seductive whisper he employed just now, I could not have brushed it

off.

I made the mistake of looking at him, and realising how close our heads were to each other, I bit my lip. I felt his breath on my cheeks and knew he could tell my respiration was becoming irregular.

"Well…" the words died in a murmur on my lips. Which was a very good thing, for I did not know exactly what I might have said. Especially since I was once again caught up in wondering about the nature of his lips. Were they as soft as they looked? *Good gracious! What has come over me today?*

Fitzwilliam chuckled gruffly, turning away towards the room. "Did you know that when you catch a fish, Elizabeth, you cannot reel it in all in one go, but you must loosen the line and slowly guide it to you? The fish must choose to come closer on its own with a little persuasion."

Confusion certainly, but given the rapid pace of my heart, gratitude, too, filled my mind for his timely change of topic, little though the new one interested me. I almost believed myself capable of needing that chaperon had he not spoken. To think that I might have acted as Miss Bingley did filled me with surprise. It might not have been wrong, in truth, since we are to be married; however, I imagine Fitzwilliam would not have appreciated my forwardness. When that aspect of our relationship came about, I hoped I was not the only interested party.

"I know little of fishing, as you well know from our conversations with my father."

Fitzwilliam made a fascinating sound in his throat, which drew my eyes there. "Then forgive me for choosing such an uninteresting topic. Please tell me more about the snow creatures you made. Were they very good likenesses?"

I laughed, "Hardly! I think Kitty might have had the most success with her bunny, but then Lydia stumbled right into it, and that was the end of it. My own small dog was not recognisable at all."

"I wish I could have been there to see it."

I did too. In so many ways.

Chapter Twenty-One



The following week saw an abrupt change in the frequency of visiting between Netherfield and Longbourn. If Charles had spoken to Mr Collins and requested a degree of separation, I could not say. On our side, the infrequency of Jane's and my visits to Netherfield was merely a result of timing. Our beloved aunt and uncle Gardiner arrived as planned for the Christmas season and would stay some weeks. Their arrival prevented any further visits as we were much engaged with them, our young cousins, and the merriment of the season.

I admit, I was somewhat jealous of the freedom Jane had to write to Charles. I could see how easily they both managed the separation of a few days with their not-infrequent missives. And with the path worn into the land between our two houses by Netherfield's groom—who seemed to have no duties besides conveying letters between the two lovers—the progression of their engagement was little hindered by the three miles.

For myself, I could not imagine what I might pen to my betrothed. And if I were to be so bold as to write to him, how would I feel to have any of it read by another, as would need be the case as long as my future husband was without his sight? Likewise, Fitzwilliam did not venture to write to me. Although he was aware of the reason for my absence, I had no notion whether he was displeased or relieved by it.

I did receive a note from Georgiana upon her return with the colonel, and for this I was grateful as it relieved me of the odd degree of worry I had developed with regard to who would care for Fitzwilliam. I was certain she would see to his comfort.

Surely he would tell her whether he was in need of something. Would she know which books he found most soothing if he developed a megrim? Or that he did not favour the peach preserves served at Netherfield? A penned letter of instructions, two pages through, was dispatched to my new sister soon thereafter. It was Georgiana I was thinking of, not her brother. I was relieved to know I might help the young lady in this way. The poor girl probably felt positively overwhelmed by the prospect, and the colonel was more than likely

no help at all, I was sure.

My sister teased that surely Miss Darcy could properly see to her brother's needs, she had done so, after all, before I began spending my days at Netherfield. Jane insisted this little evidence of my concern proved that my feelings for Fitzwilliam had changed and I was no longer indifferent to the man. That is how little Jane understood my reaction to him for the entirety of our acquaintance. He had infuriated or puzzled me exceedingly, but I had never once felt anything akin to indifference for him. Perhaps now I could admit that I rather liked my betrothed. And when I thought of him, the communion between us when we talked, the warmth of his hands…well, the stirrings inside me were not at all indifferent.

Strange though, I did find that among my feelings for Fitzwilliam was one I could not quite seem to identify. I often felt a disquiet inside, driving the beat of my heart into unfamiliar patterns. I found myself lost in thought, unable to give my full attention to the things around me. Every few minutes, I was struck with some notion that Fitzwilliam might require my immediate aid, and standing, I intended to rush to Netherfield and see myself to his side, only to then realise how little need he might have of me with his cousin and sister again nearby. Oddly, these moments left me feeling a little hollow and lethargic, the sudden burst of energy at once felt dissipating like the steam from my oft-forgotten tea.

Soon after their arrival, this listlessness that plagued me was noticed by my dear aunt Gardiner one evening, and she joined me in the spot I was seated.

"You are very far away, Lizzy. When your father challenged your uncle on that passage, I fully expected you would be amused by his absurdity."

Blinking, I endeavoured to harness my thoughts to focus more clearly. "I cannot account for it, Aunt. I wonder whether I am coming down with one of Kitty's frequent colds."

She tenderly placed her hand upon my brow, frowning. "You do not have a fever. Though I have noticed your appetite is not as it usually is, and you do seem to be favouring your voice, for you have spoken so little since we arrived."

I rubbed my neck, trying to think whether it had been bothersome. "No, I do not think I have any other symptoms yet, but for certain, I do not feel quite myself."

"I beg your pardon if my observations are off the mark, Lizzy, but you do seem a little like Jane when she has been forced to wait a few hours for one of her suitor's letters." When my brow raised uncomprehendingly, she chuckled softly and added, "I wonder whether you find yourself missing a certain gentleman."

The very idea set my back straight and an objection coming to my lips, eager to be said. The words lodged in my throat though, and I had the strange and entirely jarring realisation that my aunt might have the right of it. I did miss Fitzwilliam. With a quirk of a smile, I shook my head at myself.

With a scrunch of my nose, I acknowledged the truth with humour. “How unfortunate you should have discovered that, and by so doing, forced me to realise it. The very notion that I miss Fitzwilliam is laughable, yet it might be true. It makes little sense considering how much I disliked the man before we were forced into an engagement. And I was not even the one to sustain the head trauma.”

My aunt smiled lovingly at me and placed her hand atop mine. “You did often write to us of your dislike for him. I was worried for your happiness at the news of the accident and the need for marriage. Have you resigned yourself to it, then?”

“I cannot really describe my feelings regarding the marriage. I shall admit that Fitzwilliam is not as terribly unpleasant a person as I had once thought. That is not to say he does not possess a good deal of pride and is perhaps too used to getting his way. The blow to his head has softened his behaviour to me. Even without the use of his eyes, he does not seem to look upon me with the same degree of focused disdain that he was prone to so often. How he used to stare, Aunt!”

I shook my head at the memory. It was difficult to look upon someone to find fault when you could not actually see them. Fitzwilliam’s condition had forced him into kinder manners.

She hummed by way of response and was contemplative for a few minutes. “I wrote to my acquaintances in Derbyshire when the news of your engagement arrived. I wished to assure myself that you would not be mistreated. Do you care to know how his neighbours view him?”

I was eager and curious to know! “You seem inclined to tell me, and I am not opposed to hearing it. Of what sins does my future husband stand accused?”

“Lizzy, shame on you. You ought to know by now, after having spent so much time at Netherfield as I have heard you have done in the last few weeks, that Mr Darcy is not the dreadful gentleman you once thought. Indeed, my friends could speak only praise of him as a landlord, philanthropist, and gentleman. My girlhood friend, Mrs Pickets, has two daughters working in the kitchens at Pemberley. They are very much envied, for your Mr Darcy is known to be a generous and considerate master.”

Hearing such praise from those whose livelihood depended upon Fitzwilliam could not but awaken something inside my breast. I even

felt a little stirring of pride for my betrothed. I had learned to see that a little of his manners were more from reserve than arrogance and pride. His tendency towards petulant moods aside—and I could hardly blame him for feeling a little adrift with the prospect of never seeing again—Fitzwilliam was not as displeased with the world around him as I had first thought upon making his acquaintance.

"I am pleased to hear it. And in truth I can add witness that Fitzwilliam does improve upon further acquaintance."

"But tell me, Lizzy, for we have had precious little time together with your mother's planning of weddings, what think you, beyond this, of your betrothed? You have hardly spoken his name."

"He is difficult to describe."

Her eyes twinkled when she looked at me, asking, "I know the accident forced this union upon you, but do you think you can like Mr Darcy well enough to get on?"

"Yes, I think so." But how was I to describe the undercurrent of disquiet I felt when picturing my future with Fitzwilliam? "I think my betrothed a much better man than I had once been inclined to think; however, I cannot fully resign myself to this marriage at present. Please do not press me into explanation, for I fear I could not describe it."

"Very well, Lizzy, you know you can come to me should you need to. I shall be glad to meet this gentleman of yours soon. Will he attend Miss Bingley's wedding in two days?"

"I have not heard, though I have seen him much improved over the past weeks since the accident. I daresay if he can, he will attempt it even if he had better stay at Netherfield and await the wedding party's return for the breakfast. If I may be allowed to tarnish the bright character your friends have presented of my betrothed, it would be to say that he is an unmitigated fool when it comes to his own health. He will take risks he should not in the name of keeping up appearances."

"Whatever do you mean, Lizzy?"

"When he came to ask for my hand, he had travelled against his doctor's orders and was laid up the next day with pain from the jostling of the carriage. It was as if he could not withstand that others might think he was without honour by his delay in making our engagement official. And all too frequently, when I would go to Netherfield, he would insist on being below stairs with us even when it was clear that rest would have better served him."

"Who might Mr Darcy have been keeping appearances for, then? For certainly, among friends and family, he would have been easily excused."

"Perhaps it was the servants and the potential for gossip."

"Or perhaps your Mr Darcy is reckless with his health only when it

comes to you."

The manner in which she raised her brow and smirked at me left very little question as to her beliefs in the matter. She held the opinion that my betrothed had other motives beyond his reputation to uphold, and those reasons included affection for me. I admit the notion was a pleasing one.

"Well, in any case, you may make your own observations at my cousin's wedding."

"I shall look forward to it. Oh, Lizzy, forgive me for changing the topic. I have forgotten to mention that your uncle was able to procure that herb you wrote for. He has brought it in his trunk. I shall have a maid fetch it for you later. Feverfew, was it? I have never heard of it."

"Oh, thank you! It is for Mr Darcy, actually. Papa has a book that says it might be of some use for the megrims that plague him. I thought perhaps it might be added to willow bark to greater effect."

"You must tell me whether he finds it beneficial, as I am always keen to have more useful tisanes."

"I certainly shall. Please thank my uncle for finding it for me. I hope it was not too dear a price or difficult to find."

"Your uncle saw it as somewhat of a quest, I daresay, and was pleased with his success, so you must not worry about it. We are glad to be of use."

"Well, you have been. Now, Aunt, you have thoroughly questioned me on my betrothed and can have no more curiosities there." I winked at her, amused at her laugh. "Shocking though it is, you have yet to give an opinion on the soldiers my sisters are so keen on, nor said one word about Jane's intended. How very single-minded you have been in your topic of suitors!"

"I think your sisters ought not chase after the soldiers as much as they do, and I find Jane's Mr Bingley sensible, good humoured, lively, and possessed of happy manners. And handsome too, which a young man ought likewise to be if he can manage it. I am happy for Jane."

"And this is all? Why, you had much more to say of my own suitor."

"You know very well why. From what your father has said of Mr Darcy, I think I shall be as pleased for you as I am for Jane."

"I am tempted to ask you what opinion my father holds of my betrothed. They have a perplexing way between them. Papa acts as if their acquaintance is of long standing rather than a few weeks, as is the truth."

"You might accept that as a blessing, Lizzy."

"You mistake me if I appear to feel otherwise. I am glad that Mr Darcy and Papa get on well enough. It gives me hope that he will not force me to give up my family after the register has been signed."

“Do you think he would be so unfeeling?”

“If you had asked me that before the accident, I would have answered with great assurance that he would! However, now I am not so certain. He is quite altered from the experience. I hope it is not a temporary change.”

“I shall hope and pray it is not, then. But Lizzy, I think you hold too strongly to your first impression of Mr Darcy. By all accounts he is a good man. A little reserved and lacking in levity to be sure, but a good wife might help there.”

I blushed at her words, wishing I could prevent such a reaction. In the hopes of changing the topic to one I might feel less adrift about, I spoke quickly.

“Now that you have given your thoughts on the militia, Mr Bingley, and my own engagement—and far more than it deserves—it is time you tell me your impressions on one more marriage soon to be solemnised. Having made Miss Bingley’s acquaintance when she called here with her brother two days ago and shared a roof with my illustrious cousin for more than twice that time, tell me, what are your thoughts on that union?”

My aunt’s chastising frown was undermined by the humorous light in her eyes, and together we enjoyed a long discussion on the vagary of life that would find Miss Bingley, supercilious and proud, a good fit for our cousin who was everything ridiculous.

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On the evening before my cousin’s wedding, with the firm but constant persuasion of Mrs Gardiner, my mother begrudgingly offered to host a dinner so that Mr Collins could honour his betrothed as was expected of the groom. When the party from Netherfield arrived, it was with a shock of unexpected pleasure—and some concern—to find Fitzwilliam among the arrivals.

In that moment, I knew that my aunt had been correct in her assumptions, for I readily acknowledged to myself how very much I had missed him in the preceding days of separation. He was resplendent in his green waistcoat and fitted tailcoat. It hugged his square, broad shoulders so nicely that I nearly wished I were the garment myself. Very well then, I could admit that alongside missing Fitzwilliam, I might have longed for his handsome person. Little more than a glance at Aunt Gardiner told me she had every intent to keep her word and observe us. She did not at present seem to find anything of concern.

Soon Fitzwilliam was led to my side by his relations, and I was further pleased by the assurances given by my betrothed, his sister,

and his cousin that in the intervening days, he had felt much improved. Although it was clear to me his eyes still did not see, there was a measure of relief that flavoured the air when they spoke of it, and I could not help being swept up in it. Due to this, I then told Fitzwilliam of the herbs my uncle had procured and asked whether he might consider testing their effectiveness.

The tenderness that imbued his response of gratitude produced gooseflesh up my arms, and I felt blood stain my cheeks.

"I am humbled by your sweetness and shall gladly subject myself to any treatments you wish, if it would give you pleasure."

"I would not wish you to feel obligated in any way. I had only thought if it could ease your suffering…"

"I know, Elizabeth." He paused, and it gave my heart time to settle. I had not anticipated such a little gesture would be received so dearly. "I cannot speak adequately, but know you have pleased me exceedingly with your thoughtfulness."

How was he able to produce a look so heated when he could not even see?

Chapter Twenty-Two



"Do you think it too forward of me, Lizzy?"

Jane's concerned whisper brought a smile to my lips, and I struggled mightily to swallow the laughing retort that threatened at such a sweet enquiry. She looked around us at the other patrons of the millinery shop in Meryton to be sure we were not overheard. Knowing she would not appreciate my teasing at such a public moment, I carefully levelled my voice low and leaned in to answer her.

"Not at all, Jane. You are betrothed to the man, and purchasing some handkerchiefs to embroider for him is an appropriate Christmas gift. I can see that you still doubt, so let me assure you that I do not think Charles would think ill of you for the gift; indeed, he will be charmed by your thoughtfulness. However, if you do not wish to take my word on it, ask Aunt Gardiner. She will not advise you wrongly."

The question of what I might get to give to Fitzwilliam still plagued me. I had hoped to see something that might strike an idea. Time was not on my side, and although we had not said we would exchange gifts, I felt certain I ought to get him something.

"Oh, I wish she had come with us today," Jane said with worry, as she fingered the fine cloth squares in her hand.

"She was much needed attending to our poor Mama," I replied with a smirk that Jane soon mirrored. Our mother was so much affected by the wedding several days ago of the former Miss Bingley to our cousin, that in the days after, she still declared herself ill-used by it all. The very thought of Miss Bingley as the next mistress of Longbourn was a sore point for my mother, and while I had said 'poor Mama', I really ought to have pitied my aunt, who would bear the brunt of my mother's temper today as she attempted to reconcile her to the fact that Mrs Collins, née Bingley, was now indelibly next in line to take her place. I could not help but admit that I, too, found this truth to be a little disconcerting, especially given the scene in the church the day of the wedding.

Mr Collins certainly did not conserve his words of admiration, often given in whispered supplication into his bride's ear as the vicar performed the rites. Miss Bingley's attempt at regal ignorance of her groom's incessant praise might have given the guests a general

understanding that she did not welcome his attentions—except for the glint in her eye whenever she glared her groom into submissive silence.

The wedding breakfast was equally entertaining and baffling. For all anyone could guess, the former Miss Bingley disdained her new husband. Colonel Fitzwilliam, having clearly been informed as to the events of the week before, gave me a knowing look when the bride and groom, pink cheeked and a little less put together, emerged from the retiring room where they had donned their traveling coats. I recall how she slapped her husband's hand away when Mr Collins attempted to assist her into the carriage to leave for their wedding trip. Mr Collins grinned wider than I had ever seen before and followed her quickly inside the transport.

An astonished shudder stole through me again at the memory. I was thankful that the new couple was straightaway for Hunsford after a short stay in London, and I was unlikely to see either of them again soon.

"Who is that man, Lizzy? Why do you think he looks at you in that manner?"

Jane's question brought me to the present with a little shake of my head, and I glanced in the direction she indicated subtly with her eyes. There was a soldier among several others standing on the road outside the shop window. He was, indeed, keen on my person. Involuntarily, I flushed and turned my head down to hide my face with my bonnet. While ostensibly examining a pair of gloves on the table before us, I replied to my sister.

"I have no idea, but he does seem rather bold in his look. What can he mean with such abject study?"

"Perhaps he finds you handsome."

I might have been flattered at one time with such a suggestion, but instead, I felt a shiver run through my spine and I could not account for the reason why. He was a handsome gentleman, light-coloured locks over a well-formed and filled-out uniform. However, the look in his eye when our gazes collided did not seem to be admiration but rather focused curiosity.

"I daresay, his look was simply absence of mind, but let us look at the ribbons over there. The sight of the soldier reminds me that am still in need of gifts for Lydia and Kitty."

Jane followed me to the table of satin ribbons, glancing over her shoulder as we walked. "I think you are right, Lizzy. He has left with the others to cross the road now."

A look of my own confirmed her words, and I was unaccountably relieved. I imagine my discomfort grew from knowing that I was a lady spoken for. It had been some weeks since my engagement to

Fitzwilliam had become generally known.

Soon I was involved in the pleasurable task of comparing ribbons with Jane and choosing one for each of my youngest sisters, the soldier's odd ways forgotten.

When we emerged from the shop into the morning light, I lifted my hand to extend my bonnet as my eyes adjusted. We had been laughing together as we left, for there had been a bonnet in the window that caught my eye. I had told Jane I would bet her a crown that Lydia would at some time wish to borrow money from one of us to purchase such an ugly thing and claim the ability to remake it into something lovely. Jane was amused and shocked at my suggestion, not the least by the fact that I had proposed something as unladylike as a wager.

When my eyes adjusted, I looked about for my sisters. Lydia and Kitty had wished to procure some pastries, and we had agreed to meet after. As my head turned towards the bakery to look for them, Jane whispered in my ear, "Lizzy, that officer is looking at you again."

My back stiffened, and I would not look in the direction in which she tipped her chin. "I cannot understand why. Perhaps you are mistaken, and it is you who has his interest."

I had not the opportunity my younger sisters had had to be introduced to many of the militia, as most of my time had been spent at Netherfield. Lydia and Kitty, walking often to Meryton to visit our aunt Philips, were quite enraptured by the lot of them. There was not an evening tea that their heads were not full of soldiers, my mother keen to listen to anything they could report from their walks.

Nonchalantly, I scanned my eyes across the street, intending to look as though I was still in search of my sisters. When I encountered the grouping of four or five soldiers, indeed, the fair, handsome one was looking in my direction. Before I could look away, he tipped his hat towards me ever so slightly. A maidenly blush filled my cheeks at the improper attention. We had not been introduced in any fashion, and the man ought to know better.

"I cannot like how forward these soldiers are, and I worry that our sisters, who are the most determined flirts in the county, might be in some danger."

"I agree, Lizzy. How different Meryton feels now. I should never have felt unsafe here before."

Soon thereafter though, the soldier must have realised his overstep, for his eyes changed direction and he stood taller, quickly turning his back to us and attending to his companions.

"Ladies! What a pleasant surprise to see you about town and, I see, doing a little shopping."

We turned to find Colonel Fitzwilliam at my side performing a

most elegant bow. I smiled at my soon-to-be cousin as he straightened.

"Just as you see, Colonel. What brings you to our little market town this morning?"

"If you must know, I am tasked with an errand for my young cousin. She is abed, feeling a little unwell."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear Georgiana is ill," I said with feeling.

"Do not use up your stores of concern too quickly, Cousin." Colonel Fitzwilliam smirked at my shaking head, knowing what I thought of his relaxed behaviour with me. "I daresay her 'ailment' is simply a symptom of finishing her latest novel and having nothing with which to replace it. Thus you see, I am on a quest to find her another at the lending library."

"Then I shall say she deserves still more of my pity. It is a difficult thing to finish a good book. I always feel it quite keenly."

Colonel Fitzwilliam acknowledged my quip with a nod and another short bow.

"Might I ask you fine ladies to aid me in my quest? I fear my tastes are not the same as my cousin's, and she will not thank me if I bring her home some dull war treatise."

"We would be happy to, Colonel," Jane said, and before I could say more than my own affirmative response, we were all stopped by the loud outburst of my sister twenty paces ahead of us.

"Mr Wickham! Captain Carter!" Lydia shouted with piercing inelegance. My youngest sister was waving the end of her shawl while skipping across the street towards the grouping of soldiers. Kitty, not far behind her, was carrying a sack of baked goods. At once my heart lurched with shame. The brazen manners of my sisters in so public a fashion filled me with humiliation. I hazarded a glance at our new companion, only to see a scowl such as I had never seen on the amiable man's face. He appeared furious even.

His eyes were trained on the scene and the laugh lines that were usually so clearly present on his face were gone. I began to worry what he must think of my family, what he may say to Fitzwilliam, and how I was ever to look him in the eyes again.

My sisters reached their prey and began flirting obscenely. Mr Wickham, I presumed, was the man who had displayed such interest in me. He turned towards Lydia at her call. I turned my back to the scene, unable to watch as my sister tried to tempt another soldier with a piece of a tart from Kitty's bag, her laughter tearing through the back of my head.

Colonel Fitzwilliam spoke to us with attempted civility, which did not mask his grave tones. "It was lovely to meet you ladies in town this morning. If you will excuse me, I have just remembered some urgent business that needs my attention."

“Will you still wish for a book for Georgiana?” I trembled to ask, fearing my voice gave away my embarrassment.

The gentleman smiled tightly at us, his eyes distracted. Humiliation engulfed me again, hearing Lydia’s shrill laughter. I tried to ignore the determined flirting behind us.

“I beg your pardon; I must postpone such a delightful errand. I really cannot delay a moment further.” His eyes left mine to look behind me in the direction of the soldiers and I saw them narrow with disapproval. “Shall we have the pleasure of you and your sister at Netherfield today?”

My mind hiccupped and started at his words, too occupied by the abruptness of his leave-taking. Jane rescued me and answered on my behalf.

“Yes, Colonel, we plan to visit this afternoon.”

His nod was perfunctory, his mind already elsewhere. I was looking at his hands, seeing that they were clenched, but he relaxed them to take each of ours in his to perform a proper bow. With a murmur of well wishes and a touch of his hat, he departed. Swift strides resolutely propelled him to his horse, tied some paces off.

I watched Colonel Fitzwilliam swing up into the saddle with practiced efficiency and set his horse towards the end of town. We stood there watching him until he reached the road to Netherfield and kicked his stallion into full speed like the ghosts of hell were upon him.

“I do hope his business is not an unpleasant one.” Jane said, adjusting her purchases better in her arms. I looked towards her, expecting to see the same stunned expression I felt frozen on my own features. But she was serene, even showing a small smile. It seemed the swirling tempest of foreboding surrounding me and pulling me in diverse directions was for myself alone. Jane did not seem much perturbed by the urgency with which the colonel had escaped us. Of course, Jane would not fathom the import of what had just happened. To me, it was clear, Colonel Fitzwilliam was appalled by the behaviour of my sisters. He could not stand the very sight of their ridiculousness and impropriety.

No doubt, he would soon be reporting it to my betrothed. My heart fell to my feet at the thought. I had not realised until then how fortunate I had been that much of my courtship with Fitzwilliam had been at the safety of Netherfield, away from my family. Apart from brief encounters at the recent wedding, the colonel had not been exposed to many of them.

Reaching through Jane’s arm mechanically, I steered her towards our sisters, who were giggling at something one of the officers said. With eyes cast down, determined I would not be the one to act in any

manner like them, I steeled my voice to get their attention.

"Lydia, Kitty, we must go. You will excuse us, gentlemen."

We curtseyed to the group, and Jane and I each took an arm of one of our sisters as we walked in the opposite direction towards home. Lydia pulled at my arm, wishing to say a lengthier goodbye, but I would not allow it.

"Goodbye, sirs! We shall see you again soon, I am sure. Do not miss me too dearly!" Lydia's laughter at her own tease felt like slaps from hedge branches every time she half turned to wave her hand.

"Hush, Lydia! You make yourself a fool with your flirting."

"Oh, la! Lizzy, you are so droll, I daresay the soldiers care little for such things."

"I daresay you are correct, and that is just the point!"

With a hiss, my sister pulled her arm free of mine when we reached the lane to Longbourn, skipping ahead to where Jane was with Kitty. We exchanged partners, and I could see that my younger sisters were heedless of the admonishments Jane and I had dealt out to them. They put their heads together and laughed while they pinched at their pastries and ate them all the way back to the house.

"They are young, Lizzy," Jane said with a sigh. "With time, they will grow out of these high spirits."

"Say that if it gives you comfort, Jane. I cannot help but think that their behaviour will one day cost this family far more than a few moments of embarrassment in the street."

"Let us then take pleasure in knowing that, soon enough, we will not have any charge over them as we shall be in our own homes with our husbands."

My fevered walking slowed, and I took Jane's hand in mine. Joy shone in her eyes and my own worries began to melt away. For certain, the colonel was displeased at the behaviour of my family members and no doubt would express concerns to his cousin, but I took hope in the knowledge that my betrothed did not think so meanly of me now as he had when we were first forced into this match. Fitzwilliam and I had developed a sort of friendship, and I felt that my kindness to him in caring for his needs had softened him a little. He might grimace at the report about his future sisters, but in the end, Fitzwilliam would not hold it against me. In any case, we were engaged and nothing could change that.

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With a kiss on her cheek, I left my sister to the eager and capable company of Charles and hugged the novel I had brought for Georgiana closer to me. In the hours since we left Meryton, humiliated by the

imprudence of two very determined girls, I began to think I had been a little overly concerned about the matter. Yes, my future relation was displeased by the scene, for who of good breeding would not be? He did seem a little too fiercely unsettled to be attributed solely to how Kitty and Lydia had acted. I was left on edge, though I wished to explain it away. I felt perhaps it was my own embarrassment that led me to see his actions the way I had. He was a colonel in the army, for goodness' sake! He probably had any number of important business matters to attend to.

I was caught up in the fact that for most of my life, I had felt confidence in my impressions of people around me. I sketched their characters with accuracy, reading their thoughts by their behaviours with skill. It had only been since the accident that I found my assurance in this skill wavering. I had been convinced that Fitzwilliam was an arrogant, disdainful, and hateful man, but he proved to be a gentler, more thoughtful person than I had previously given him credit. And while he was at times unpleasant, it was always when his head pained him. Otherwise, he treated me as if I were interesting to him, as though he did not see me as beneath him.

With a shake of my shoulders, I pushed the troubling thoughts of the morning aside, prepared to please Georgiana with the novel I had chosen from my own collection. And even though I did not really wish to acknowledge it, I was also feeling anticipation for spending time with my betrothed again.

As I approached the library, I heard gentlemen's voices within. The door was ajar, and I paused, deciding how best to announce myself. I did not wish to disturb their private conversation. I had just determined to find a servant to point me in the direction of Georgiana's chambers when I heard my own name through the door.

With traces of my earlier insecurities staining my better judgment, I crept closer to listen. My cheeks coloured at the disgraceful action, yet I could not pull away.

Their voices were somewhat muffled but I could make out most of the words and learned the occupants of the room were Colonel Fitzwilliam and my betrothed.

"You cannot possibly think it feasible to live the rest of your life in such a manner, Darcy! For God's sake, can you not imagine the future…?" His words were lost here as I could hear he was in some motion, perhaps pacing. "It is unlikely to ever end, and you will be plagued again and again."

Fitzwilliam's reply was inaudible, or perhaps it was made indiscernible to me by my own suffocating thoughts. I could not catch them as they flew behind my eyes, each darting in and out against the inside of my skull. Did the colonel believe so little of my family now?

“You know there is little I can do about it, Richard! I have tried, believe me. I have thought about its hundreds of times from every perspective. There is no solution.”

“Then you must agree.”

Each second of silence after that felt like a stone placed upon my heart. “There is no honourable way around it, Richard.”

“Georgiana agrees with me,” Colonel Fitzwilliam added, a coup de grâce.

His tone contrasted with that of his cousin’s; I could hear the fury and resoluteness in the military man’s. In my betrothed, there was much less animation, though simmering beneath his exhausted tone was his own current of anger.

“You spoke to her regarding this?” He allowed that undercurrent to come to the surface with added outrage.

“You know why I did. Darcy, listen, you are far too prone to let emotions cloud your judgment on the subject. Let me fix this. You think it impossible, but I believe I can do it.”

I heard very little more. Fitzwilliam’s voice was resigned, pained even, but he agreed with only a small admonishment. “Take care her reputation does not suffer.”

I pressed myself against the wall beside the door. The book edges were cutting into the flesh of my hands. My heart began a savage pattern of beats. How foolish I had become to believe that Fitzwilliam had reconciled himself to our marriage. How utterly baseless were those comforts I had allowed myself to have regarding our future. He did not wish to marry so beneath him, and clearly, the arguments of his cousin regarding a future tied to a family such as mine convinced him to admit his distaste for the idea.

Why did he leap to save my life if he disliked me? Why would he risk so much, and how could I have ever believed that I might eke a little happiness out of the horrible ordeal? I thought back to the pain I felt upon waking beneath the inert form of Fitzwilliam. Sharp, stabbing slices of it ran through my centre with every breath. The darkness of the world around me was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I could not have seen my hand in front of my eyes then. With a hollow silent laugh, I compared the pain I felt then to the pain now, and there was no comparison. Could a rain shower be compared to a raging tempest? Agony filled my soul, and the sun was stolen from my sky. Darkness surrounded me again, and I knew with tragic and unendurable truth that I had done the very thing I had hoped to not do: I had fallen in love with Fitzwilliam Darcy.

Foolish, foolish girl! I berated myself, as I pressed the heel of my palm into the side of my head.

I wish I had been buried in the earth that day, perhaps I might

have been spared this death of sorts. I could not draw breath any more, and in truth, I felt the world begin to close around me as it had under the ruins. Images of our time together over the past several weeks began to pass in front of my eyes in ever quicker succession. I had mistaken resignation as admiration, boredom as flirtation. I wanted to hate every memory for the cuts they slashed across my heart. My only comfort lay in knowing that Fitzwilliam could not have seen what he had captured of me.

At least his ailment had prevented him from seeing the blushes, triumphing in my naivety. He could not see the way his touch affected me, and I was determined he never would. How could I have allowed my heart to be stolen by him? Had I not warned myself against such an outcome?

The humiliation of earlier that day was nothing to this. I suspected that if the colonel knew of my folly, he had been kind enough not to say anything, but the looks he gave me at times told me as much. Funny, I had thought perhaps he approved of my growing admiration for his cousin. I had begun to think my new relations accepted this forced marriage as much as Fitzwilliam had. How stupid of me to trust that the little interaction they had with my family up until this point was insufficient to sway them against the friendships we were creating.

How could I claim any feelings of betrayal when I had no claim to their loyalty? But betrayed I felt. Fitzwilliam and I had spoken tentatively of our future together. He described Pemberley with such detail and had said numerous times that he wished for me to see it. Had we not begun to develop a warmth between us, even an attraction stirring within? I had cared for him, and not just because it was my duty, but because I took pleasure in it.

I wondered how Fitzwilliam expected the colonel could be successful in extricating him from this misalliance. Our engagement had been much canvassed about, and its necessity likewise known. He could not jilt me without serious and ruinous consequences to my reputation.

“Let us speak no more of this, Richard. What is the time? Elizabeth ought to be arriving soon, and I do not wish to speak of this to her.”

“It is half two, and you will have to speak to her sometime.”

A loud slapping sound echoed around me, pulling me abruptly from the remaining conversation. The numbing hole expanding inside me had reached my fingers, and they gave up their burden. The book had slipped through my hands and fallen with resonating outrage to the floor at my feet. I heard the scraping of boots, and thinking only of my survival, fell to my knees to retrieve it. The note I had written to my new sister, previously tucked inside the book, had scattered out of

reach. I launched myself towards it, hoping to have enough time to stand and compose myself before I was found.

“Ah, rest easy, Darcy, it is only my new cousin,” Colonel Fitzwilliam threw over his shoulder into the library behind as he opened the door. “Elizabeth, allow me.”

He had his hand out to assist me up from the floor, though I kept my head down until I could place the note back inside the book in the hopes of finding further composure. His voice was jovial again, the impassioned anger subsided and tucked away. How duplicitous it felt now, and this show of gallantry—and a show it most certainly was!—felt every bit like the stabbing pain my injured ribs had given me. Still, I could not reveal that I had been eavesdropping.

I placed a shaky hand in his and mumbled about clumsiness as I allowed him to help me to stand. I used the excuse of brushing off my skirts to keep my head bowed as he gestured for me to precede him into the room.

“Is this a book for Georgiana? Elizabeth, you are a treasure! If you do not mind, I shall run it up to her right now.”

“Thank you. But I—”

Before I could form the words that would enable my escape, he had taken the book from me, smirked at its title, and walked out the door, leaving me standing in the room with the man I loved, but who could not love me.

Chapter Twenty-Three



For several silent moments, I allowed myself to look at him, grateful he could not see the anguish in my eyes. How I found pleasure in this after what I had just learned of his plan to extricate himself from our untenable situation, I do not know. But pleasure still coursed through me to see the heightened colour in his cheeks, the health that seemed to radiate from him.

I startled though, when the deep timbre of his voice travelled to me, a resounding caress in my ears.

"Welcome Elizabeth, I am glad you are come. This morning was dull without your conversation."

I winced at this confirmation of my earlier fears, that I was merely a source of amusement to him. How odd that he should sound so sincere even as his words cut.

Still, like some half-starved waif, facing a feast of nourishment, my legs ventured closer to him even while my heart screamed escape.

"Will you not come and seat yourself?"

It would seem my legs had no intention of following my heart's advice, for they went unerringly to the place where he gestured beside him. We sat, and I felt my ribs restricting my breath like they had not in weeks.

"You look well, sir," I ventured, and he did. The little pinch about his eyes that seemed to never really go away had faded a little.

"I have you to thank for that, Elizabeth. That tisane you gave me; I think it is helping. Usually I feel a slight pressure about my head all the time, like a too-tight hatband, but that has eased."

I ought not to have the ability to care as I did at this little bit of welcome news. Why was it welcome, and how could I be pleased about his healing when he had just broken me to pieces with the intentions he discussed with Colonel Fitzwilliam? Of course, he could not know I had overheard their discussion. It was paramount that he never knew what power he had garnered over me.

"That is good news."

I said no more, and for a while neither did he. He lifted his hand to me, and for once I did not place my own in his. The action felt too much, too close to the truth. That he could, with so little effort, ask

something of my heart, and I would give it to him. Still, I yearned to relent and the emptiness grew at the deprivation.

He lowered his hand to his leg again, and his brow furrowed. I found that I had been watching his every expression for several minutes despite my best intentions of keeping myself from that torture. That pleasure. How thankful I was at that moment for his blindness. That he could not see how pathetically I craved him.

"You are quiet today."

"I…forgive me. I fear my head aches a little." And my heart.

"I am exceedingly sorry to hear that. Shall I ring for some tea then, some of that miracle herb you have given me? It will help. Or perhaps a glass of wine?"

The concern in his voice seemed all too real, and I told myself not to be fooled by it. Forcing my throat to open, I drew a deep breath.

"I thank you, no." With a swallow, I prepared to make some excuse and go. I wanted to remove myself from him with a need so animal, it felt alive inside me.

"Darcy, did I mention that I saw Elizabeth and Miss Bennet in Meryton this morning?"

Both our heads snapped to Colonel Fitzwilliam's voice as he entered the room again. I could not fathom why he would wish to introduce such a topic if it were not to humiliate me in front of his cousin for my sisters' actions. It seemed that my betrothed did not approve of the topic either.

"Richard, I think perhaps now may not be a good time."

"I disagree, for you know she must know."

Had I been so transparent in the moments before the colonel left to take the book to Georgiana? Did he know I had heard it all from the door? I sat terrified at the thought. I was not prepared to face this so soon. My hand pulled mercilessly at the curl on my neck, while my heart began to pound a rapid beat inside my head.

I looked at Fitzwilliam then, worried for his thoughts. It was clear he knew what his cousin was alluding to. His jaw was taut, and he spoke between clenched teeth. "Richard—"

"Elizabeth, when I saw you in town, we were interrupted," the colonel cut in, ignoring his cousin.

Fitzwilliam protested again, clearly unhappy with his cousin's insistence.

"Sir, what you witnessed, let me just say that…"

I knew not what I could say that would make up for the indecorous behaviour of my sisters. I stood then and stepped away. It was an impetuous move, born of the instinct to retreat.

Fitzwilliam stood too, having detected my movement. Though without knowledge as to where I had gone, he turned towards the

direction of his cousin's voice.

"Richard, enough! This is not the time to speak of such things. Elizabeth is…" He turned to the room and with a barely controlled voice, spoke to me. "Elizabeth, I do not wish to add to your suffering."

As I took further steps towards the door, the colonel manoeuvred to block me, his hands lifted in supplication that I might stay.

His voice was less determined, certainly less cavalier in its manner, while he reasoned with Fitzwilliam. "You know it cannot be helped now. She must be told."

I looked to Fitzwilliam and saw the anguish upon his features, anguish and simmering anger. I had never seen him so furious, and I admit it scared me a little. I no longer knew what was up and what was down. Looking upon his face twisted in such agony of helplessness, I wished to comfort him even as my own heart was breaking in two. It was no easy task to stand there anticipating the moment when the words I dreaded would reach my ears. Involuntarily, my slippered feet moved silently a few steps closer to him again. *Foolish, stupid girl!* I told myself. *Why go to him when he means to cast you out?*

Suddenly, it seemed Fitzwilliam succumbed to his cousin. "Fine! Do as you wish. It is not as though I can stop you!"

So quickly did the next moment happen after his heated retort, that I can hardly recall it with accuracy through the frozen thoughts of my mind. Fitzwilliam stepped aside, which led him into a side table. When he began to fall, it was instinct to reach for him to support him. The colonel stepped forward too. And then pain rushed through my empty hand when Fitzwilliam pulled his arm out of my grip with tremendous force, as he managed to right himself and stagger towards the wall of books.

"Blast it all, Richard, I do not need your help! I am NOT an invalid!"

I held my pulsing fist to my chest and desperately gestured to the colonel to not correct his cousin's mistake. I knew enough of the gentleman Fitzwilliam was that he would be all the more distressed if he knew that it had been I who had attempted to aid him.

I could see the whole incident had enraged Colonel Fitzwilliam, and although I could no longer trust him, I was grateful beyond words when he nodded stiffly to me and, with a tight jaw, ground out a rebuke to his cousin.

"I shall thank you to be more mindful there is a lady in the room."

Fitzwilliam stopped in his pacing along the bookcase, his hand extended to it for support.

"My apologies, Elizabeth." His voice had lost all of its anger, instead filled with remorse.

“Think nothing of it,” I assured him before turning to the colonel. “Perhaps he has the right of it. Whatever you wish to speak of clearly pains him, and perhaps we should not—”

Fitzwilliam gently interrupted me, entreating me to sit. “I do not wish to speak of this because it will not be pleasant. I would have told you someday soon anyway, so it might as well be today.”

I slid somewhat inelegantly into my seat, firmly closing off the beating organ inside my chest, determined to allow these gentlemen to have their say and not show how much their words affected me. I nodded to the colonel, my eyes hooded from his discerning view. So I was to receive this blow now.

It was Fitzwilliam who began speaking, and his words were baffling. Since my mind had been prepared for an onslaught of acute pain, it was sluggish, and I could not follow well enough to fully grasp what he was saying. He seemed to be speaking of his estate and his childhood.

“…son of my father’s steward, who was an exemplary man. For many years we were companions and friends. Though it was not long before I began to see parts of his character that were not easily discerned by my father.”

The colonel cut in. “Wickham could not hide his true colours from those of us closer to him, his peers. The degenerate man he was would come out!”

“I am sorry,” I ventured, the pulsing in my head now also affecting my cognition. “Of whom do you speak?”

“Today in the street, your sister spoke to a soldier. Mr Wickham,” the colonel clarified with a frown. “You do remember?”

Fitzwilliam was pacing again, and although I understood enough now to know they were acquainted with the gentleman in the street, I still could not understand what that had to do with the shameful display from my sisters.

“Yes, I recall,” I said slowly, still not grasping its import to this Mr Wickham other than he had been the man my sisters had called to. I recalled that with embarrassed acuity!

At times the colonel spoke, and at others Fitzwilliam did. All the while, my intended paced along the length of the bookcase, and I watched the caged tiger in him rage against the blackness of his world that kept him needing to hold onto the side of the bookcase. He was in endless motion, desperate to expel such constant agitation in the form of clipped steps back and forth along the length of the room.

They described the nature of their acquaintance with this Mr Wickham, and then the list of misdeeds and painful betrayals that the former childhood friend had perpetrated against Fitzwilliam. I could not help but feel compassionate pain for the sorrows of a lifetime with

one that should have been a friend. When they, in hushed and impassioned tones, spoke of the attempt against Georgiana, I cried. I cried for the little girl who was heartbroken and lied to. I cried for the sweet girl Georgiana still was, and the guilt her two guardians continued to burden themselves with over the matter. And a part of me was ashamed to admit, selfishly, I cried for the realisation as to why they would share such a deeply personal and painful narrative.

My sister's imprudence was far worse than simply accosting a gentleman in the street, as improper as that was. No, Lydia's actions had cost so much more, for she had chosen as her favourite the source of so much pain for my betrothed that any connexion to a family so faulty in judgment, was, as the colonel had said before he discovered me in the hall, not 'feasible to live the rest of your life in such a manner.' My power, if indeed I ever held any over him, was sinking; everything must sink under such a proof of family weakness. I could neither wonder, nor condemn, him for this choice.

However much my insides were being crushed to pieces, I could not sit there and watch the memory of such a long history of malice disturb Fitzwilliam. Before I had given it much thought, I stood and my heart had taken me to his side. My hand rested upon his chest, halting his fevered pacing. He froze, and lifted a hand to cover mine.

"I am so very, very, sorry, Fitzwilliam."

It was all the words he needed, for the tiger folded in on himself then. His shoulders slumped forward as he stepped into the space nearest me. I felt his need for comfort and gave it willingly despite the knowledge that it would likely be the only time I would be afforded such a privilege—or perhaps *because* of that knowledge.

I rested my head upon our hands at his chest, and I felt his head lay upon mine as the blissful torture of his other arm came around to envelop me in his warmth. How vividly I then remembered the feel of his embrace in the ruins, almost to the point that I swear I could smell the earth around us. His lemon and sandalwood cologne swirled in my senses, intoxicating my head in the process. Unbidden tears welled up inside, and I wept in his arms. We had endured so much and *lived*. We had begun a tentative friendship together, both hopeful in his recovery, yet I would have to allow him what he wanted. It no longer mattered that my family's impropriety had been the impetus. If they would humiliate him in such a way with their actions, the way Mr Wickham had all his life, then Fitzwilliam must be protected from such a fate. True, his childhood companion had more malice in his actions than did any of my family, but that did not change the fact that he had already endured more in one lifetime than was fair for anyone.

With time, I began to become aware of soothing murmurs as he

held me close. His hand rubbed along my spine in agonisingly blissful sweeps. I soaked it in for a few more minutes as I composed myself, attempting to set it to memory like the moments in the ruins.

At length I recalled we were not alone in the room and my back stiffened.

"He has left us. You need not worry, Elizabeth."

I looked up and into the room, and indeed, Colonel Fitzwilliam had left, closing the door behind him. I had not heard his exit. Though, apparently my companion had.

Fitzwilliam lifted my chin with gentle fingers and traced light touches along my jaw, and then all thoughts of embarrassment and loss fled my mind. Every nerve and thought were focused upon the point of contact between his fingers and my heated skin.

My eyes fluttered closed when the pad of his thumb swept across my bottom lip, pulsing currents went scattering across my skin. I felt I could swoon and reached my other hand up to steady myself upon his arm.

"Elizabeth, I…"

His heady breath flowed across my cheeks, and I knew in that moment that if I stood there an instant longer, then I might get a chance to taste perfection. I was also certain if I allowed him to kiss me, I would know more pain than it would be possible to endure.

With painful determination, I left half my heart in his hands as I pulled carefully away from him. The few steps were essential if I were ever to live after he left. True, it would be a half-life of sorts, but it would be possible.

Fitzwilliam sighed and rested his head against the stack of books to his right. I watched his laboured breathing and wished with every cell in my body to return to his protective and warm embrace. I had never felt so safe as I had in the earthen cave of ours and in his arms just then. But it was a false sort of security.

"Forgive me, Elizabeth. I forgot myself."

Instead of speaking, I gave him my hand and he kissed the back of it. I then led him to sit on the sofa again. In time, I felt in better regulation of myself to speak.

"I am sorry you have had to recount such a history. I shall attempt to speak to my sisters. They cannot know what kind of man he is."

"Please do not be troubled. I have given Richard leave to handle the matter. He was correct: at some point, I would have needed to explain it all to you. Until today, neither he nor I knew Mr Wickham was in the area."

"I have never been introduced to him before. Today is the first I have heard his name. How does Georgiana do?"

"She is recovering remarkably well. Her new companion, Mrs

Annesley, has helped her to see where she was not at fault and, perhaps more importantly, where she was."

"I am glad to hear it. It cannot be an easy thing to have someone you love hurt you like that."

My voice faltered then, and I choked down the feeling. Thankfully, Fitzwilliam seemed to conclude my feelings were solely for his sister.

He spoke a little then of his memories of Georgiana growing up and the responsibility he had towards her. I could not help admiring the mantle of father and brother he took upon himself for her. With manifold effort, I pushed all thoughts of my impending loss to the side. Although escape felt like a clawing need, every moment with him was still a desired treat.

"Has my cousin told you the good news, Elizabeth?"

Startled by Colonel Fitzwilliam's abrupt entry, we looked towards the door as he walked into the room again. That was all I needed, to have the overly perceptive colonel see what I was feeling or trying not to feel. As little as Fitzwilliam currently saw, his cousin saw far too much. Still, a part of me was glad we were no longer alone.

"Richard, I think, perhaps, after all we have already—"

"Darcy would have you always be left in the dark, it seems."

I looked up at my betrothed, searching his face for answers. "Is there more?"

Fitzwilliam's hand slid off his leg and, with uncanny accuracy, captured mine. I stifled the urge to flinch at the exquisite contact.

"I did not wish to raise any hopes, not until I could trust the outcome would be lasting." He paused before adding, "Perhaps we have already exhausted you. How is your head?"

Colonel Fitzwilliam cleared his throat. "He is trying to procrastinate."

Against my better judgment and given the nervous anticipation I could feel trembling in Fitzwilliam's words, I looked at the colonel. He smiled broadly at me, but what I had overheard him saying to my betrothed flashed in my mind. I turned away from him before he could read my thoughts.

"Very well, then. Elizabeth, what do I not owe you? Since I have taken the feverfew you gave me last week, I have not just the cessation of the headaches to thank you for, but how do I say this…"

It took me a moment to follow and a thrilling happiness shot through me, only to be crushed with the fear of what discoveries could not be hidden from him now. Not if he…

"Do you have sight?" I asked, slipping my hand from his and crushing it to my chest with my other. My heart was beating too swiftly; surely it would burst from my ribs if I did not hold it there.

"Not exactly," he began hesitantly, though not without joy. "In the

mornings, there are times I can discern light and some colours, though it is still hazy. The doctor sees this as a very good sign, and he believes the feverfew might have eased what minor swelling in my head was still there. In essentials, I might have regained my sight soon enough anyway, but the herbs you gave me have hastened that along."

I held my breath. It was marvellous news, and because of the love I had for him, I felt it in every part of my being. I longed to have this ability returned to him; I had prayed for it long and fervently. I could not imagine a world where this man could not be the strong, active sort of gentleman he was normally. It was a source of heartbreak to see him so dependent on the care of others. Dependent on my care. And therein, the joy I felt inside turned to dust. He would not need me as he had before, and that had been the source of all our accord. His need had been the reason we had begun to find some kind of contentment with each other. How quickly I felt unnecessary, and the feelings I had been so careful to suppress threatened to burst out of me.

"I cannot express to you how this news makes me feel. Indeed, can it be true?"

"It is true, Elizabeth, and I have you to thank for it."

His gratitude was poor substitute for his love. I wish I had not listened at the door when I had heard him say my name. A part of me had thought he might speak of his feelings for me to his cousin. How ridiculous a hope. If Colonel Fitzwilliam was successful in his determination to find some way to preserve my reputation yet break our engagement, then at least I could have been spared the pain of waiting for that moment. I could have lived a few more days, or perhaps weeks, in blissful ignorance.

My eyes fell upon the colonel then, carefully not meeting his eyes, wondering what his plan was.

"Can you see now?" I questioned hesitantly. I had a sudden need to know, though only courage enough to whisper it.

Fitzwilliam grimaced. "No. More the pity, by the usual time you arrive, my eyes go dark again. The doctor believes it is residual fatigue that will fade away. But I am determined to be whole again."

I was trapped in the earnest regard he settled upon me. My heart began to beat again, each pump exquisite torment. When I could take it no more, I turned away, only to be caught in the gaze of his cousin. In that moment, I knew all my attempts to hide my thoughts were for naught. He knew. He knew I was in love with Fitzwilliam Darcy.

I wondered at the cruelty that could invoke a smile on Colonel Fitzwilliam's face at his discovery of my feelings, and furthermore, how he could produce an expression that almost seemed sincere. He

was pleased that I had given over to my feelings for his cousin. Nothing was clearer to me than that, yet I knew of his plan and felt anguished that he could take pleasure in what it would mean for me.

I shuttered my thoughts, exerting as much effort as I could to hide them from him. I shook my head at him infinitesimally, nearly begging him to keep my secret. How I thought I could trust such a man was beyond me; indeed, I knew I ought not to. Somehow it felt essential, though, that Fitzwilliam never learn I ever loved him. If he intended to throw me over, then I could not imagine an agony worse than knowing he did so with the knowledge of my feelings for him.

The colonel seemed confused by my expression, and I turned my face away.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Soon thereafter, I found the excuse to leave the gentlemen. My headache, at first fabricated to explain my silence, was in truth no longer a falsehood. The tumult of my mind was now painfully great. I knew not how to support myself in public. My astonishment and pain, as I reflected on what had passed, was increased by every review of it.

"Please excuse me, gentlemen. I fear I am unwell and must beg to return home."

Fitzwilliam stood immediately and offered his hand to assist me to stand. "You do not sound well, perhaps it would be best if you were given a room here at Netherfield in which to retire."

"No! That is, I thank you. I would much rather not impose, and wish only for the comforts of my own bed."

"Then you must take every care. Richard, will you see that Miss Bennet is informed and their carriage is called?"

Colonel Fitzwilliam accepted and soon left us again.

"I must apologise for the events of this afternoon. I fear it was unpleasant for you."

I did not venture to speak; indeed, I could not have forced any words through the constriction of my throat. Fitzwilliam took up my hand after a disconcerting travel of his touch down the length of my arm.

"I hope to hear soon you are well."

Somehow, I was able to look into Fitzwilliam's handsome features, wondering how long I would be afforded the pleasure of calling him mine. No doubt his cousin would be successful; he seemed to be the type of cunning strategist where all parties played into his hands. My intended's dark locks curled around his face, soft and inviting, as I knew them to be. His eyes, although still lost as they had been since we emerged from our tomb, seemed to look right through me. I murmured a goodbye, watching as if time had slowed to a crawl as he pulled my hand to his lips once again, this time turning it to kiss the flesh of my palm too.

In a daze, I managed to arrive at the carriage. Charles assisted my sister into it before me, and gave me his best wishes for my health. And then the colonel was before me, his eyes boring into mine,

expecting answers I did not feel he deserved to have. I knew he had seen that my feelings for his cousin had changed. I could little afford for him to reveal that to Fitzwilliam.

Even though my heart had long since lost its will, somewhere inside rose a fever that built into a conflagration. Without any wish to hide my thoughts, I glared at the colonel.

"You will not say anything to him."

He seemed stunned by the ground out words and attempted to question me. "You love him! I cannot see why you would wish him not to know. I can assure you he would—"

"Colonel Fitzwilliam, be so good as to, for once, step out of my head and allow me to have this…" Every fevered coal, burning with anger, went cool. My knees trembled with actual weakness. "This mercy, sir. Allow me this mercy."

His hand reached out to steady me at my elbow, his expression that of concern, almost as though he did not intend to be the sword wielded with Fitzwilliam's permission that would deal the killing blow to my heart. It was all too much.

"It will be as you wish, then." His brow furrowed with obvious disagreement and displeasure.

I could do no more than nod, and allowed him to assist me into the carriage. When we began rolling along the gravel drive, Jane asked after my head. I spoke only vaguely, then burst into tears as finally my heart allowed it, and for a few minutes could not speak another word. Jane, in wretched suspense, could only say something indistinctly of her concern and observe me in compassionate silence.

When safely left in solitude in my chamber, I succumbed fully to the reality of my broken dreams. I had been reborn when I emerged from that tomb only to be feel buried again in this anguishing defeat. At times Jane and our aunt attempted to care for me. They brought cool cloths for my head and teas to help the megrim, and admonished me to remember tears did not help with the pain. Believing me to be simply suffering under a severe headache, I acquiesced to all their concerned attempts to ease my pain. I drank the tea, left the cool cloth over my eyes, and eventually even slowed my tears.

Although their belief of the source of my pain was mistaken, they had at least been accurate in saying that tears would not help the pain. Indeed, they had not. When a blissful sleep overtook me, I welcomed the oblivion with desperate thanks.

Unfortunately, as is the case with heartache, sleep did not cure it. In a way, I opened my eyes the next day not fully awake, and I spent the day walking the house in a state of distracted wretchedness. I haunted the upstairs hall, pacing from the landing to the small oval window at the other end, and I felt like a ghost, half my soul removed.

The view out the oval window was the lane to the house and afforded me advance warning of any visitors. Therefore, for several days, I was quite able to anticipate when to retreat to the safety of my room. As it was, my low spirits contributed to an actual cold, and I was not expected downstairs in any case.

Of course I was questioned. My father, Jane, and even my mother expressed concern for my continued poor health. The former two wondered whether they ought to call Mr Jones on my behalf. My mother was worried I would displease my intended by being away. How little she knew, yet how closely she guessed the truth.

My aunt, like Colonel Fitzwilliam, seemed possessed of an uncanny ability to read people, and even though she did not believe I was physically feeling as poorly as I let on, she did not press me either. It was a nod to her greater understanding that she did not question me. Still Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam called, always sending their best wishes for me through Jane.

I knew I could not hide away indefinitely. Although I was entitled to some days of wallowing, my cold was running its course, but I kept to my room for more days than I might otherwise have done with such a minor illness. I intended to make use of the excuse of my health to seclude myself, and then one day—when I had crushed this love for Fitzwilliam down into the depths of my soul to a place where I might not have to live with its slicing cuts every day—I would hold my head up again and pretend feelings of wellness I knew I would never really feel again.

Once, while I watched unseeing out the oval window, I spied Colonel Fitzwilliam riding towards Longbourn unaccompanied by his young cousin. He had a purpose to his stride when he handed the reins to our groom. I cannot describe what motive would cause me to subject myself to the torment, but I crept down the stairs to the landing, where I could hear his address to Mrs Hill. If he was calling again upon me, then I would take the coward's path and retreat to my room. Loath as I was to be this despicable creature, I was not ready to hear what the military man might have to say. When he spoke then of wishing to see my father, I was left with the cruel realisation that he had come to execute his plan on behalf of Fitzwilliam.

My legs no longer able to support me, I slipped onto the bottom stair. My head leaned against the smooth curves of the bannister. I expected the tears would come again, but they did not, and I sat there unseeing, even when the men emerged some thirty short minutes later. That was all the time it took to destroy one's happiness. A mere thirty minutes.

"You mistake me, Colonel, for a man of more action than indolence, but I shall this once agree to this unpleasant commission. I

shall have to endure many tears, and I suspect even perhaps a broken heart, if I am not mistaken."

"I assure you, if there were any other way, I would not ask it of you."

"I dislike it very much," he replied, "but it must be done."

"Then you will inform Miss Elizabeth? I had hoped to speak to her myself, if she was well. I dislike leaving these kinds of things for others to cross off."

My heart seized and I went still. If I rose now, the sound of it would warn the gentlemen of my presence. I even held my breath.

"Aye, she will certainly be informed, though I cannot think she will be much affected by the news. I am sorry to say, she is still unwell this morning."

Not much affected? Had I been so vocal in my dislike for Fitzwilliam's moods, and before the accident, to lead my father to believe I would be immune to desertion from my intended? Any decision so critical to my future was bound to cut, yet he believed I would not be affected. Had he truly just mocked the possibility that my heart might be broken?

The colonel spoke of his concern for my continued ailment. He expressed his and Fitzwilliam's best wishes for a speedy recovery to be conveyed to me as well as the hope of seeing me again at Netherfield ere long, and then he left as swiftly as he had arrived.

I took to my bed for the rest of day. A part of me railed at this weakness I was displaying. Where was the lively Lizzy of before the accident? The girl who could laugh at the absurdities of one arrogant man and was immune to any words of malice from him? That girl had been lost in the ruins. This one, who lay hiding beneath the covers and wiping the occasional tear, had very much been affected by Fitzwilliam Darcy and, I daresay, in a way that would leave me changed the rest of my life.

Colonel Fitzwilliam's visit at least gave me the knowledge that this detestable state of half mourning was not endurable. I must face my future, as bitter as it would be. Knowing I had fully recovered from the cold, I decided enough was enough, and the next day, I ventured to the breakfast room instead of requesting a tray. I was gladdened that news from Meryton distracted my family from what could have been acute observation. My façade was newly in place and untested against the scrutiny of some.

"I cannot believe it of him. I shall not! He was much too handsome to be a scoundrel," Lydia wailed, tossing half her scone onto her plate with a pout.

"Oh, my dear girl," began my mother in soothing tones, "I, too, know what it is to lose my heart to a soldier."

“I shall thank you, Mrs Bennet, to remember that Mr Wickham’s desertion is not a loss to any member of our family.”

I turned to Jane and asked what this was all about. Hearing the name of Fitzwilliam’s childhood companion threatened to bring my thoughts too close to those I had been mired in for the past week.

Jane leaned in to whisper to me as she poured me some tea. “It seems that a soldier, Mr Wickham, has accrued a fair bit of debt in the village and offended one of the shopkeeper’s daughters. When his misdeeds became known, the other officers declared he owed them debts of honour. He left the militia and has not been seen for two days. As of this morning, he was declared a deserter.”

A hanging offence. I wondered how Fitzwilliam would feel about this. I cannot imagine he would welcome news that his former friend, although long a source of anguish, had a capital offence to his name. Where there were good memories of childhood escapades, there would be pain. How uncanny the timing of this development, coming so soon after his revelation regarding Mr Wickham. I longed then for the chance to see Fitzwilliam, to offer my sympathy for what must not be a pleasant business despite the sins perpetrated against him by Mr Wickham. I felt all at once the foolishness of my self-seclusion. I had not saved myself any pain in the process, as I had hoped. Instead, I had deprived myself of any opportunity to be in his company and had stolen chances for more memories for myself. One day, all I might have of him were these memories. It was unacceptable and stupid.

“I am exceedingly sorry to hear it. Do Mr Darcy and his cousin know?”

“I believe it was the colonel himself who smoked him out. He came to tell our father about Wickham’s habits and entreated him to speak to the shopkeepers since, as local gentry, he would have more credibility with them.”

“So he purposely sought to make Mr Wickham’s deeds public?”

“I believe so. Charles has said as much. It was part of the plan to get Mr Wickham to act, and as we see, he has done so.”

“I wonder at what Colonel Fitzwilliam could be thinking. How could he know Mr Wickham would not retaliate and speak of…”—I caught myself before I spoke Georgiana’s name—“…some fabricated tale of mistreatment on the part of Mr Darcy or the colonel? Their reputations might have been harmed.”

“The colonel would have been too late for that, Lizzy. It seems in the hours we had been spending at Netherfield, Mr Wickham had been doing just that. Our sister is convinced that your intended has deprived Mr Wickham a living bequeathed to him in the old Mr Darcy’s will.”

“That is true enough, though only after paying Mr Wickham the

value of the living when that man declared no intentions of going into the church."

"You are well informed, it would seem." This came from Aunt Gardiner, who had appeared at my side.

"Mr Darcy and his cousin spoke to me of their acquaintance with Mr Wickham before my illness. I am surprised that Mr Darcy would approve of his cousin's plan, for there seems much risk in it."

"I have no doubt the colonel anticipated Mr Wickham's flight and more than likely has had men watching him. He needed only wait long enough for the militia to declare the desertion before Mr Wickham could be apprehended. I suspect we shall hear soon of that news."

My aunt's prediction was not long in its fulfilment. Indeed, later that day, much to the wailing and tears of my youngest sisters, a note arrived from Netherfield informing us that Lieutenant Wickham had been found near Billingsgate in London, attempting to purchase passage on some vessel. The letter for my father was included in one of Charles's missives to Jane.

I could hardly believe it, but as the days following would prove, the entire scheme had been arranged by the colonel for the purpose of ridding England of Mr Wickham for good. I craved the chance to ask Fitzwilliam his thoughts on the matter. I wondered whether I could predict his reaction with any accuracy. At one point I might have said I knew him well enough to say, but I doubted my abilities now. I, too, wondered and worried for Georgiana. I hoped she was not much affected by hearing of Mr Wickham. Certainly there could be no escaping it. The news was much talked of at Longbourn over the next day or so. Lydia often took herself to bed in mourning, feeling personally affronted that Mr Wickham could dare be so handsome and quit the militia. Naturally, in a girl of not quite sixteen who had not yet learned to value much else other than a handsome face and a red coat, Mr Wickham's more grievous misdeeds would not have been a concern for her. Lydia still believed that Fitzwilliam was the source of her favourite's troubles, and no amount of reasoning from my family would convince her otherwise. Mr Wickham was as ill-used as she was.

Still, Mr Wickham did not long dominate the lives of those at Longbourn. Instead, news of a more alarming nature reached our ears. Just as I had convinced myself and others that I would soon feel well enough to resume my visits to Netherfield (for I had been asked on several occasions by my aunt and father in such a manner that left me certain they had their suspicions that my headache and subsequent cold were not the only reasons I stayed away), we had visitors.

Charles and Colonel Fitzwilliam came one day, the former striding

into the morning room with all the energy and cheerful jubilance that he was known for. But instead of going straight to my sister's side as was expected, Charles walked purposefully to me.

"Elizabeth, we came straight away to inform you of the wonderful news."

Colonel Fitzwilliam, now standing beside him, added, "My cousin has regained his sight in full."

Chapter Twenty-Five



Regained his sight in full?

My thoughts skidded to a halt, and although I felt all the eyes of the room upon me, I could not utter even the merest of sentiments. My soul grew with joy for my beloved and plummeted with dread in the next second. Charles took up my hands, which felt as if they had turned to ice, and expressed his delight and relief to me and my sister, who by this time had stood to lend me the support of her arm. Fitzwilliam could see now, and I was selfish enough to wonder, despite my happiness for him, how this much-hoped-for blessing would further change things for me. Would it hasten his and the colonel's plans?

"We are come to fetch you to him, for he would not countenance staying at Netherfield as a precaution otherwise. If your family can spare you, the carriage is yet waiting."

The room erupted in exclamations of happiness, my mother's outburst sounding above the rest. Her joy was intermixed with utterances of concern that Fitzwilliam might change his mind when he saw me so altered by my recent illness.

"For I fear she may have lost her bloom!" Mama was saying none too quietly to Aunt Gardiner.

Her untimely reminder that Fitzwilliam had at one time called me merely tolerable did little to strengthen my confidence or add to my courage. Still, it could not be helped. I would go to Netherfield, not only because it was expected and right of me to do so, but because I longed to see his face more than I wished to draw breath. To know he was no longer plagued by the disconcerting blackness that he had been mired in for more than a month was a source of joy for me because I knew it would bring him happiness.

"We ought to all go!" Mama declared, and before any objection might be raised, Charles seconded her pronouncement and assured her of her welcome at Netherfield. And so in very little time indeed—under the inconsequential span of thirty minutes—the entire household wrapped up against the cold and pressed into carriages en route to Netherfield to congratulate my betrothed on his returned sight.

For myself, I was apprehensive and scared. There was not much more I could say than that. Fitzwilliam's blindness had been a security blanket of sorts for me. I could look upon him anytime I wished, and take pleasure in it without his knowledge. I needed never to hide my blushes or school my expressions around him when he had flirted, touched my hand, or spoke of any number of topics near my ear, where his breath would tickle my curls there. With his eyes unclear as they were, I could hide my feelings from his view and convince myself of any returning sentiments I wished.

At once, I recalled the stern and disapproving way he used to stare at me before the accident, and I feared for its return. Would he realise all the more the incongruence of our stations when his eyes could not hide the truth from him any longer? It would certainly not help to have my family all there, yet a part of me was glad for it. There was little to no chance that I might be left alone with Fitzwilliam with all of my family there to see him. I spent the entirety of the ride to Netherfield practising my smile at any words sent my way regarding this fortunate turn of events. With any luck, I would be able to hide my fears behind the real happiness I felt for him. He would know I was pleased, but he would not be able to detect anything further.

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I walked into the parlour with legs numb and a heart floating someplace outside my body. Hesitantly, I lifted my head and surveyed the room. I knew where he was before I had even set eyes in that direction—the part of my soul he had claimed pulled me there. I might have laughed to see Fitzwilliam standing once again near the window, as he had often done before the accident. It almost seemed too familiar, and yet strange. All the time since he lost his sight, he had been safely seated. So his stance, tall, broad, and independent against the light behind his shoulders, was a shock straight to my chest.

How handsome he looked, virile and strong. Used to free perusal of his person, my eyes unabashedly scanned every inch of him. I admired his fine leg jutted out in a masculine stance, his blue waistcoat pulled tight against a trim waist, and his superfine tail coat stretched across strong arms and beloved hands held behind his back. When at length my eyes had drunk their fill yet still thirsted for more, they lifted to his face, and at once I realised how dangerous this habit of being free with my observation might be. I had forgotten myself and the fact that my greedy eyes were no longer hidden from their object as they once had been.

Fitzwilliam's eyes met mine in a manner such that I could not walk

further into the room. My impropriety was justly returned in measure, for at once I saw his eyes take their own studied journey of my person, and I felt all the more embarrassed for my rude perusal. Every inch that his eyes travelled along the length of my dress, up my arms, into my hair, and finally settling their scorching search at my face, felt like fingers dancing along that same path.

Between us, Fitzwilliam was surrounded then by my mother, dragging along my youngest sisters, to loudly congratulate him. She stood praising him for his cleverness in getting his sight back and flattering him with all manner of ingratiating excess that could only enflame my cheeks beyond the hue they were already stained.

He smiled politely to my mother, tearing his eyes from me briefly to thank her for her sentiments. Although his eyes only left me for but a moment, I felt the air cool around me and was grateful for the reprieve. Soon enough, his well-wishers stepped aside and I was presented before him by my mother's clawing hand, like the sacrificial lamb for his approval. The heat of his glare once again burned my skin.

Tipping my head down, I curtseyed and mumbled a barely discernible greeting. "Mr Darcy, I am pleased you are fully well."

I anticipated it, held my breath so that I might not miss a single second of the sound of his voice when he replied, but it did not come. He cleared his throat a number of times, and I agonised with the desire to look again into his features to see how he felt in this moment, but I had not the bravery. In the end, he merely bowed low to me. He would not even attempt the apparent difficulty of pronouncing my name.

The rest of my family then stepped forward, taking their turns to express their sentiments to my intended, and although I was deposited by his side throughout, I could not help but notice how cold he seemed to one and all. To my aunt and uncle, he was everything polite and civil but without the feeling of expression he had developed when they met at Mr Collins's wedding. I had some relations for whom I need not blush, yet Fitzwilliam could hardly speak a word to them any more. His sight had returned and so, too, it would seem, his reserve.

At least he was speaking, making me jealous of every word that spilled through his parted lips to another when he had yet to gift even one to me. I was also drunk on the sound of his voice and wished to hear as much of it as I could. I had been far too deprived over the past week of pouting and wallowing in my despair. It seemed now such a waste of time to cry in my bed over a lifetime without him when I might have been listening to the deep timbre of his voice and feeling his accent caress his words, making them interesting in new ways.

When my father's turn came, Fitzwilliam gestured for us to seat

ourselves. We three moved to some chairs partnered together not far off, and once again he was speaking to my father about—of all the possible things—fishing! My jealousy drove me to anger. So he could speak of fish but not breathe my name.

"I suspect the time for casting is past, my young man. 'Tis time to reel in your catch."

Fitzwilliam laughed then, the first moment since we arrived with any hint of the amiability I had witnessed in him during his sightlessness. I marvelled at it even while the envious monster inside me grew more discontented. I felt all the perverseness of my jealousy even as I acknowledged it was the feeling I was swimming in. I knew better than anyone in this room, save Fitzwilliam himself and his cousin, that I had no real claim to the man beside me. I had no right to be jealous of words and laughter aimed at another. Nor should I feel envious of fish!

While I sat there trying to harness my growing ire, I realised soon enough that we were left to ourselves when Fitzwilliam gently pressed on my bouncing knee.

The unexpected touch jolted through me, and I pulled my legs to the side and his hand dropped away. The silence then was deafening. I tried mightily to not let my leg bounce again, but I had agonised for days at the loss of him, and now that proof of the return of his sight had resurrected his disapproval of me, I could not suppress the burning anger at it. Whereas before I had felt unworthy of him due to the improprieties of my family members, now I felt all the perverseness of being angered that Fitzwilliam acted above his company. Present company especially.

"I thought you might be pleased that I have regained my sight."

Would the sound of his voice always pull me in two directions? Both addictive and painful to hear?

"You mistake me, I am very happy for you."

"Your bouncing knee tells otherwise, Elizabeth."

"Perhaps I wonder at how easily you managed to speak to members of my family yet, until a moment ago, could not utter a single word of welcome to me."

Biting my tongue, I wished my words unsaid for they were far too revealing of my feelings, and I did not like how exposed I felt with them out in the air now.

Fitzwilliam again cleared his throat, bent his head towards mine, and with a voice pitched so low I felt it scrape right through to the inside of my belly, he said, "A man who felt less might have said more, Elizabeth."

My eyes lifted to his then, and held. They were clear, focused in that way they were before the accident, yet unfathomable in new

ways. My soul lurched and stretched thin as we continued to stare into one other's eyes. When I thought of what he had endured to save me, the blindness and uncertainty of his future, I felt my anger melt away, replaced by compassion, love, and the desire to have the God-given right to care for this man for the rest of my days as reparation. Yet I could not even hold on to that wish, for it felt so very fragile, and my eyes began to swim, water filling them to where I could no longer see his face clearly. I willed the tears away; they were stealing him from me as surely as his plans to end our engagement would soon enough.

I looked down and endeavoured mightily to suppress those sentiments that were making my eyes well up.

"I missed seeing your fine eyes—"

"Please do not say such things," I blurted unthinkingly. Fitzwilliam was being kind, but knowing what he planned to do, I could not cope with it.

He sat upright, away from me. The space between us cooled.

"If that is your wish, if it does not please you for me to say such things, then I shall not."

"It does not."

He nodded then but remained silent. How could I explain to him that such words did not please me because of how much they cut? Every tender emotion within me felt exposed for his examination and rebuffing. I had no sure hope that anything unwillingly expressed in my eyes of my sentiments towards him would ever be returned to me in his.

The gulf between us now felt impossibly wide. We were away from others in the room, and I now suspect that this might have been intentional. I noticed from where we sat that Fitzwilliam and I might have a private conversation without anyone interrupting. I began to worry that he would say the words I had been dreading, and I searched the room for some means of escape. I saw the colonel end his conversation with Mr Hurst and begin walking our way, and I knew retreat was now essential.

I stood at his approach, and Fitzwilliam stood beside me. I wondered whether I would always be so attuned to his every movement.

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I have yet to greet Miss Darcy."

Before either could reply, I slipped quickly to the other side of the room. Every step away from him felt a personal betrayal, yet a lifeline. I greeted Georgiana with genuine warmth and true affection. In the weeks since I had met her, I had grown to really love her. I thought about how the colonel had said Georgiana knew of their plans and agreed, yet I could not feel any of the resentment for her that I felt towards her gentlemen relations. She was all that was good and sweet,

and it was only right that she would trust her relations to know what was best.

We spoke of my illness, and I assured her of my well-being. Then I asked about Fitzwilliam's sight, easing the curiosity I had not dared voice to him that had clawed inside me for answers. Unexpectedly, I learned that he regained his sight more fully a few days ago but had not wished to say anything until he was certain it was a lasting change. When each day showed that he could maintain his vision for the entire day without bouts of haziness or darkened fatigue, he agreed to trust in it. However, it had been the work of Georgiana, her cousin, and Charles to convince Fitzwilliam to wait at Netherfield for me to come to him. He rightly chafed at this insinuation of his frailty, but acquiesced when reminded that they had yet to test his vision after a jolting carriage ride. Georgiana seemed to believe it was more important to her brother to truly see me—no matter the locale—than it was worth the risk that travel might reverse his sight again and take from him the opportunity.

As Georgiana and I spoke, I would occasionally allow my eyes to fall upon Fitzwilliam where he stood with his cousin. Indeed, I could not help myself, for my eyes craved him more than they ought to. At times I was startled by a focused stare aimed directly at me. I wondered what fault he was categorising then, for he seemed almost unaware of the weight of his gaze. At other times his cousin would say something to him, and it was clear they were in discord over the topic. Fitzwilliam would shake his head and run his hands through his hair, while the colonel seemed to be insisting on something.

I became distracted once, when viewing this, by his movements. In company, I had witnessed him before the accident to be always controlled and unemotional. After the accident, he seemed almost human with his fluctuating emotions, as if with his sight gone he could no longer hold anything within. Yet this morning, as soon as I entered the room, he was shut off again and inscrutable. Now, when his back was turned to me in a quiet argument with his cousin, he was again impassioned.

The difference made my heart sink. It seemed Fitzwilliam was controlled and closed off as long as he could actually see me. The very sight of me must make him aloof, and the thought of it chilled my heart.

As attuned to him as I was, it was with no surprise that I followed him with my eyes as he concluded his conversation with his cousin and strode to join in the grouping with my father, uncle, and a distracted Charles, who was casting long looks towards Jane seated a little away.

My mother spoke too loudly then to Mrs Hurst, inadvertently

drawing the attention of the entire room.

"And you must have heard about what happened to poor Mr Wickham."

Silence reigned, and far from being deterred or embarrassed by the sudden attention, my mother relished in it and her voice grew louder. I felt Georgiana still beside me.

"It is truly disheartening to see how unchristian some might be to a man wanting to make it in this world. Mr Wickham had some debts, I know, but who among the gentlemen do not? I think it quite hard on him that the shopkeepers drove him from Meryton. For myself, I feel it very badly done."

"And now they will hang him!" Lydia burst out, shocking all and making me feel as if the bindings Mr Jones had insisted I wear after the accident were still on.

Georgiana reached for my hand, and the tender entreaty for support compounded my humiliation at my relations. Would my mother and sister not learn to spare their breaths to cool their tea! I cared little after that about what was spoken regarding the topic. I knew only that Mrs Gardiner blessedly tried with futility to remind my mother that Mr Wickham had not proved honourable, and she was aided in that endeavour by Colonel Fitzwilliam. I turned to Georgiana, and upon seeing the distress in her eyes, apologised for my mother.

"Please do not worry, Elizabeth. It is only that I had not known they will…that his punishment would be…"

Seeing that she would soon be overcome, I spoke aloud, "Come, Georgiana, there is an excellent prospect out this window I wish to show you."

After some minutes with our backs to the room, my companion composed herself and thanked me for my efforts to help her gain control of her emotions.

"Do you still have feelings for him, Georgiana?" I prayed she did not, but could think of no other reason than this to have her be overset by the news that Mr Wickham would face the established consequence for his desertion.

"So he has told you. I had agreed with Richard that it ought to be done, but then you became ill, and I had not thought he would have the opportunity." Georgiana drew in a deep breath, and after a moment, continued, "No, you mistake me, for I do not still care for George Wickham."

"Then why…"

"It was simply the shock of hearing he will lose his life. I had not considered it, though I should have, as that is the accustomed price of his actions. I am saddened by the loss of the life he ought to have been able to live given the opportunities my father handed him, and I was

surprised by the natural conclusion to the one he has instead chosen to lead."

"That is a mature outlook, Georgiana. For my sister, I apologise for the unmannerly way she spoke of such a morose subject."

"You must not worry about Miss Lydia. In a way, I admire her high spirits. Neither my brother nor I have ever been able to emulate them."

I turned then naturally, to her brother and once again saw his eyes locked in our direction. With a sigh, I turned towards the window, utilising it for my own composure this time.

"We are both drawn to such characters though," Georgiana concluded.

I offered her a small smile at the compliment. I hoped that I might have the pleasure of maintaining a friendship with the girl when this was all over. Surely, with my sister marrying his best friend, we might at one time or another cross paths. The very idea was both a lifeline and a piercing pain.

I contemplated my family and their many improprieties. Today's example still smarted as I could hear my mother continue to amaze the room with the absurdities spouted from her lips. While I loved each of them, I could not help but feel cheated by them. I wondered how nearly losing my life when Bodden Chapel collapsed around us could feel a blessing, considering all the changes it had brought to me.

Fitzwilliam and his relations entered my life in a way that I had never imagined and left their mark on my heart indelibly.

A touch at my shoulder again brought me back from the brink of emotion to see the welcome sight of my father. His eyes were creased with worry, but he turned a congenial smile towards Georgiana even as he said, "Lizzy, will you do me a favour and see whether Mr Bingley has a book on drainage that might solve our problems in the west fields?"

I very much doubted Charles had any such useful book, and began to say as much when he cut me off with a focused look.

"Go on, my dear. Look in the library for it, will you?"

It was as clear a dismissal as I was going to get, and I realised at once what a boon it would be to escape for a short while. I felt his gaze upon me as I curtseyed and left the room as unobtrusively as I could.

Chapter Twenty-Six



I underestimated the power of the memories that lived in the library, permeating its walls and scenting the air with the ghosts of conversations, laughter, and warm touches. The moment I stepped into the hallowed space, I felt assaulted by them. This was where I had learned to love, yet had also experienced the heartache of unrequited love. Over the course of the past month, I had spent more time in the quiet sanctuary of this room with Fitzwilliam than I had in any other. No wonder it now felt more like the sacred halls of a church than a library.

I ran my hand along the edge of the sofa where we had sat most times. Its rich leather had no real life to it, but I felt the stirring of those memories as my hand dragged along the surface. I contemplated the warmth with which he spoke of his home, the pride in the work he had needed to learn to be its master. He told of long-held servants that seemed dearer to him than some of his relations. I had felt then that he wanted me to love Pemberley as much as he did, I had been certain of it at one point. And as much as I was able, I did love it as I saw it through his eyes.

I wiped my cheek and became appalled at the wetness I found there. It was sentimental and foolish of me to dwell on what I knew very well would never be. Even as I chastised myself for this, I raged a little at the revelation I had gained that fateful day in the hall. It had felt such a shock because I had begun to trust Fitzwilliam and believed that I might one day have a marriage of affection. For certain, I had come to feel such for him. Hearing them speak felt so wrong, I could not trust it. And then I was ashamed at how it only showed how gullible I had been. If his wish to break the engagement despite the potential to ruin both of our reputations was such a colossal shock to me, it only meant that I had been wilfully blind the entire time.

I walked to the bookcase where we had embraced the last time we were together. With a heart breaking in two, I held on to the shelf there and let my head fall in quiet sobs. Behind me the door opened and the sound of the door clicking closed reached my ears. I did not need to turn to know who had entered here. My heart sung out to him and felt him near.

I listened to every careful step towards me, marvelling at the odd notion of this additional change with his returned sight. Fitzwilliam could come to me. While he was blind, I always had to go to him. I drew in breath and steadied myself. I was prepared, I thought, to listen to him speak his plans for us. Had I not resolved to accept it when I left my room again after my health returned?

"Elizabeth, we must speak."

I purposely kept my back to him even when I felt his hands on my arms.

"Must we? Yes, I suppose we must." I walked away, wiping at my wet cheeks and allowing the churning inside me to ebb and swell until it became a tidal wave of anguished, incensed thoughts. "Yes, let us. Out with it then! Speak, sir!" I spat in a sudden rage to see this finished. I cared no more for the drowning feeling I had experienced every day since I had heard him tell his cousin to seek a solution to our engagement.

I watched as my anger at first surprised him but then soon began to fuel his own. He paced again like the caged tiger, only this time there was a power in his walk that was both attractive and fearful. My heart sped at the fierceness of his face, the churning expressions flitting across it so quickly I could not catch them all. What his thoughts were, I could only guess, but I was sure to hear them soon. His anger was near the boiling point, I could tell, yet I could think of nothing that he had to be angered over. *Nothing.* I scoffed at the very notion that Fitzwilliam Darcy had anything about which to complain.

He had disliked me before the accident, and through some unlucky act of chivalry on his part, he was bound to me in a manner that he could not have been pleased with. It was not as though I had wanted this marriage either! However, I did not seek every day to push him away as I often felt inclined to. Instead, I had cared for him, listened to him, talked to him, and answered any number of his impertinent questions about my attire. And in return he, in concert with his cousin, wished to set me aside. Indeed, what had Fitzwilliam to be angered over?

He had succeeded in making me fall in love with his damnable self, and now, when his cousin must have surely found some way to spare Fitzwilliam from this burden of honour and duty, his sight returned. It would seem fate was on his side, yet he was unhappy about it? Every unwelcome coil that had befallen him due to his rash decision to save my life had resolved itself, and he would soon be free. He ought to be rejoicing. Instead his chest was heaving, and he was looking at me as if I had stabbed him in the back!

"It is clear you have something to say, Mr Darcy. So let us get this over with and speak it."

At this speech of mine, he shook his head, a look of incomprehension on his face. He turned his back to me and appeared dejected as he used the wall behind him for support. I wondered briefly whether being this unsettled might cause a reversal with his health, but I dismissed the thought. I needed to learn to not forever be concerned with Fitzwilliam's well-being. It would not be my privilege soon, and it was imperative that I become accustomed to that. Swallowing a lump of despair, I waited for him to speak. When he did, I was caught off guard by the calmness in his voice. I expected rage and anger. I expected barely-controlled emotion as I had just witnessed. His voice was instead flat, devoid of feeling, spent.

"I am in the unhappy state of almost wishing to be blind again, Elizabeth."

At so illogical a statement, I could not help but blurt back at him, "Whyever for, sir?"

He filled his lungs and held his breath, his broad chest expanding while his face flashed through several expressions again. This time I caught pain, defeat, and frustration. He turned his head as if he could not bear the sight of me.

"Because at least when I had no vision, you were gentle to me; you were warm and caring. I had begun to convince myself I had succeeded in making you fall in love with me, fool that I am. At first I had told you I wished to delay setting a date for our union until I regained my sight, yet after weeks in that hell of darkness with the feel of your touch lighting my world, I could take waiting no more and was resolved I must have you, even if I could not see what you looked like as my bride!

"I had determined to speak to you last week about a date for our wedding. I was hopeful we might still find happiness with each other, even if I would always be a burden to you."

He pulled a ring from his pocket. He looked at it, folded it into his fist, and his face contorted from pain to anger again in an instant, and I felt the slap of it.

What had he said? He had been hopeful that we might find happiness with each other? A memory pricked at my thoughts then. When he had emerged from my father's study after seeking his blessing, Fitzwilliam had said he hoped that once I knew him better 'you might find it possible for us to find happiness together in time'. Not *we*, but me. As if happiness with me had already been there for him.

"And now…now that I can see your beloved, enchanting face…an image I had despaired of ever seeing again, a sight that I was resigned would forever be lost to me…"

He began again to pace, and the disorder of my thoughts went

with him across the space of the floor as I tried to comprehend this unreality, this dream spinning in my head. I could not be hearing him correctly, yet he was still describing the pleasure of seeing me again.

"My last memory of your face was of it reflecting the horror in mine when I saw the danger you faced as the collapse happened. I had thought I would live a lifetime of agony with that picture. Elizabeth, can you not see? I could not live with that image. I could not bear to think that the last time I beheld your countenance, it was at the moment you might have died. I believed that was the last image I would always have of your beautiful face. Every day until the day I offered for you, I raged at the doctor's restrictions. I had to know you were well, for that moment haunted me. And it was utter torture!"

His voice changed then from plaintive to fuming despair.

"But now, now I *can* see you." He scoffed humourlessly. "My eyes work once again, and I find in this a torture worse than before. For now you are cold to me, and I cannot help but wish I were a broken man again—especially if all I was ever to drink from your lips was your compassion, not your love. I would take it. I would take it."

As speeches go, it was not entirely coherent, but it was lovely, and I gasped great gulps of air as I tried to gather the pieces of my heart that had been broken inside me and hold them together with his words. I could make no sense of them, yet I yearned for them to mean what I hoped they meant. How had I been the blind one?

"I do not understand."

"Forgive me, I can see I have distressed you. You must forget I spoke at all. I should never have given so little credit to what your father said."

I saw he intended to leave, and I tripped over my skirts to prevent it. *My father?* I had more questions now than ever, and while I had been given my first breaths of air in a week since that suffocating day in this very room, I was not about to allow them to go unanswered.

"Please, sir." He would not look at me, and it shattered me. Never since the accident had he not sought to see me, even when his eyes would not comply.

"Fitzwilliam, please."

The plaintive quality to my tone must have convinced him. I was nearly without words when he turned those dark eyes back to me, boring into me in such a searching manner that I could not help but allow all my defences to crumble and let him see what was in my heart. His gaze dug into me. Searching tentacles of questions reached into my chest and grasped my heart. I never felt so raw and exposed, yet relieved when his eyes gentled as his search yielded what he looked for—my heart revealed to him through my eyes what was inside.

“Elizabeth…” It was barely a whisper, a prayer upon his lips, but it spoke to my broken soul, and with a sob, I ran into his arms. God in Heaven as my witness, this was where I was always meant to be.

He held me to him with a reverence that mended some cracked, lost space inside me. I still had so many questions, and there was much more for us to speak of. However, for now, this was enough to calm the river of pain inside.

Fitzwilliam gently ran his fingers through the curls near my face, causing havoc to my coiffure. He murmured words of soothing that I could not allow myself to deserve right away.

“I have courted prepossession and ignorance and driven reason away where you were concerned,” I protested. “When my eyes were opened to your real character—”

“Shh, my love. Let us have no more of this.”

I had been the blind one all along. I deserved the pain I now felt at the realisation of how wrongly I had judged him. I had been truly blinded by prejudice, never allowing myself to trust in his honour or that he would offer for me after my reputation had been compromised from the accident. And when he came to offer for me—apparently against the wishes of his doctor and without a care for his health—I had been surprised. Still, I did not allow this proof of his goodness to clear my prejudiced blindness towards him. Time and again over the course of the many weeks of our engagement I had questioned his honour, if not directly, then within my heart. I mistrusted him when I assumed what his opinions would be about my family, when I misjudged his moods, and when, most egregiously, I listened to a private conversation.

“I owe you many apologies. They are too numerous to count.”

“Nonsense, Elizabeth. Only please tell me what I did to push you away this week. To see you again and have you so closed off to me…”

“I overheard your conversation with Colonel Fitzwilliam in this very room last week.”

He looked down at me, clearly not following, yet eager to absolve me of any wrongdoing. I could not let him do so. I had listened where I ought not to have, and it had caused us both suffering. Together we walked to the sofa where we had always sat. I took up his hand as we had often done and nearly cried when he thanked me for the small gesture.

“I came to visit you and heard you say my name before I entered. Colonel Fitzwilliam admonished you against a match with me and the degradation it would be to you for a lifetime. He advised you to allow him to resolve it, and you agreed as long as he did not harm my reputation. You see, Fitzwilliam, that is why I have been so wretched to you. I still cannot comprehend the declaration you just made and

the incomprehensible gift of your love, for I cannot reconcile it to this shameful eavesdropping and what it revealed to me of your feelings towards our marriage. I want to believe the one, but my heart is afraid to trust in it."

He was shaking his head before I had even finished, his eyes traveling over every inch of my face as he did so. As though he could not help himself, he reached for my cheek and gently caressed it. I closed my eyes at the touch, pleasure skipping along the nerves there.

"I cannot understand what you think you heard, Elizabeth. I did not advise Richard anything of the sort. To do so would have cut me in half. And besides, it has been he who has championed my fondest wish to try to win your heart."

"But I was here; I heard you say it. You said there was no honourable way around it, and your cousin reminded you that your emotions clouded your judgment in this case."

His face cleared, and his lips parted in a heart-breaking smile. His hands left where they held my face to slip into my hair once more, and with gentleness, he pressed his lips to my head and held me there. Tears slipped out of my eyes at this tenderness. It made my heart soar to believe that perhaps, between the two of us, we might manage a way to listen to our hearts and ignore what others might think of our match. Did not our hearts matter most?

"Dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth. Could this really be true? I feel as if I am still casting with no hope for a such a gift as your regard. But if you were injured by what you heard—and I see that you were—then I am both sorry for your pain and reeling with happiness for what it means."

I began to pull away, needing to see his eyes to understand such a confusing explanation. But he held me to him, pressing his lips to my head again and inhaling my scent. I felt time stopped, but it was only a moment before he moved.

Groaning, he pulled away, putting space between us and determinedly using my hands as anchor for his own. He shrugged at me with a boyish grin as he said, "I am only human. But let us clear this misunderstanding first. Elizabeth, we were not speaking of you. We were speaking of Mr Wickham. You must have heard your name when Richard told me about encountering you in the village before he discovered Wickham. He was correct that every time I am required to endure the unpleasantness of my former friend, I am too emotional to make sound judgments. I have been perhaps too lenient with him. Richard was asking me to allow him to handle Wickham as he saw fit. I knew Richard would not go easy on Mr Wickham, and the remembrance of my father's preference for the reprobate gave me pause, as it always does."

He shook his head and gazed at me earnestly. “However, you heard me relent, allowing Richard to conjure a plan to rid us of Wickham. And as you must know, his plan has worked. George Wickham set his own trap before falling into it. And Richard was able to do it all without a hint of anything towards Georgiana’s reputation.”

I looked into his eyes for any deception and could not see any. I felt all at once the idiocy of my assumption. Yet it was further proof of how little I trusted in Fitzwilliam’s goodness and affection. Or perhaps I wished to be wilfully blind to it, keeping myself safe from my own growing feelings. Once again I had assumed he would act dishonourably towards me. My insecurities about my family’s improprieties haunted me long before I met one Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley. I let them colour my vision, rule the rationality of my mind, and blind me to the truth. They nearly cost me my happiness with him as well.

“You have been without sight, yet I have been the one to allow my prejudice, pride, and fears blind me to everything. How can you wish for such a foolish wife?”

“Very easily, Elizabeth. Very, very easily. But you are not foolish, only misinformed. And you have not been the only one to have been blind in some manner. Though I have had your father, at least, to thank for helping me to see.”

Relieved beyond measure at his clemency, I allowed myself to be calmed. His mention of my father reminded me of my other questions.

“My father? Do you mean you might tell me what you learned that was so enlightening when you asked him for my hand?”

Fitzwilliam laughed quietly as I had hoped. I loved the sound of his laugh.

“You are teasing me again, and I cannot tell you how it pleases me, my love. Yes, if you are willing to hear it, I shall tell you a story of a man far more blind than the one you cared for so sweetly these past months.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven



A *story*. His words warmed my heart. I nodded, unconsciously moving closer to him. He placed his hand along the back of the sofa, and when I felt his fingers intertwine with the curl at my neck I nearly wept again. The familiarity of such an action, after thinking I might not have a future with him, tugged all the remaining pieces of my heart back together. I leaned into him then, because my heart begged to be closer to his.

"Once upon a time there was a man from Derbyshire who came with his friend to a small village situated north of London."

"Was he very handsome?"

He grinned. "The friend? Oh, terribly. All the ladies say as much."

I laughed as I brazenly settled into his side. He stiffened at first, and then with a slow inhale pulled me against him more tightly. It was a comforting weight, and I wondered how I had ever lived without it during these weeks since our night in the ruins. He had held me similarly then, and I remembered now how much his warmth comforted me in those terrifying dark hours.

"I meant the man from Derbyshire. Shall we say he, too, is exceedingly handsome?"

I could hear his smile against my hair. "If you think we ought, but Elizabeth, this is not the important part of the story."

"Oh it is quite important to me. Carry on, then, about the ravishingly handsome man from Derbyshire."

"Ravishing? Well then, I thank you. This handsome—or otherwise—man is the blind man in the story. He came to this town and almost immediately insulted the most bewitching lady in the county at an assembly by lying to his friend about her beauty."

While we had been light-hearted and amused, at this point his voice was sincere and remorseful, and I could not laugh at it. Tender, bruised feelings from that night intruded upon my thoughts and were soothed by his confession.

"And as the weeks went on, the blind man continued to become more enamoured by the lady. She was lively and clever. Her wit was astounding and alluring at the same time. The blind man was hopelessly lost to her and did not even know it. She teased—"

“Argued.”

He laughed and the sound wrapped around my heart.

“I might remind you, this is *my* story, darling.” He punctuated his words with a kiss to my brow again.

“She teased him and little by little drew him further into her thrall. He was in the middle of loving her before he knew he had begun. And here we come to the part where you may not feel pleased with our blind man from Derbyshire.”

“Extraordinarily handsome blind man from Derbyshire,” I corrected, looking up to him with a smile.

Although he smiled back at me, it was a little sad. “Elizabeth, I must tell you before I continue, I cannot and do not feel the same way as I did then.”

I acknowledged this sentiment by snuggling into his side again.

After clearing his throat, he began again; this time his voice was solemn. “This blind man believed that even though this lady was magnificent, she was beneath him and he could not marry her. He looked meanly upon her family, her neighbours, and her connexions. He was arrogant, selfish, and filled with disdain for the feelings of others. He was blind to their real worth and blind to what mattered most. She was, in fact, his superior in many ways.”

His words could not but cut, for the sting of them was only what I had believed his sentiments to be this past week. I did not enjoy hearing him speak the fears I had drowned in, but I held to his assurances that his sentiments had changed, and they were my mooring.

He was quiet for long enough I almost wondered whether that was the end of his story, but then I realised he was struggling to hold rein over his feelings. I felt him swallow through some constriction.

In time, he choked out the following words, “And then one day the world turned upside down, and the blind man saw clearly for once—”

“And saved the lady in every way that matters. In body, spirit, and heart.”

I drew my legs up and knelt on the sofa beside him, placing my hands upon his cheeks. I wiped the single tear that fell from his dark lashes with the pad of my thumb. Searching his face, I was lost for words at the torment in his eyes.

“Good God, Elizabeth, I almost lost you.”

I saw again that horrified look I had witnessed before he had leapt to my rescue. I felt it travel through him at the juncture where my hands held his face and journey into me, to permeate my beating heart. I imagined how I might feel if he were in such danger, and at that moment, anguish unlike I had ever known seized my breast.

I was taught all my life—and indeed, it is the accustomed tradition

—that the gentleman leads the lady in the initiation of any act of physical affection. However I have never been a traditional lady, and instinctively, I allowed my heart to guide my lips. They were directed and went unerringly and without hesitation to his. I may have broken with tradition in the commencement of our first kiss, but my intended soon found his way through the initial shock of my actions and pulled me against him with possessed hands, his lips assuming command.

And command me they did.

I was at the mercy of their warm and firm instruction, and it did not take me long to become an eager pupil given the heady sensations that coursed through me like a straight shot of lightning through my veins. My head filled with euphoria, and just as I began to catch up with the tide of sensations pulsing through me, he broke the lifeline to this bliss as he pulled back, breathing heavily like myself.

“I love you, Elizabeth. I do.”

I smiled at him, unbelieving that I could be so fortunate to hear those words from him.

“And if you cannot discern from my shameful actions, I love you too.”

With swift movements, he gifted my lips with another intoxicating kiss. I felt like whimpering when he broke away after too little time.

“Not shameful, never that. But perhaps we ought not to be engaged much longer. I fear one taste and I am unlikely to live long without another. And another.”

Fitzwilliam’s voice had gone raspy by the end, and while I blushed at the thought, I was stirred by the strain in it. He attempted to regulate it better when, after locking eyes with me, he began speaking again.

“Come, there is still a little more to the story.”

I settled into his side once again as he began in halting, emotion-filled tones. I listened in awe as he spoke, knowing he needed to give voice to it more than I needed to hear it. I understood his feelings for me and returned them. This portion of the story was for his own healing.

“I did not think when I saw the danger, Elizabeth, I simply did what my heart commanded. You were there in death’s path, and the very thought of you coming to harm, or worse, revealed to me where I had been blinded all along. I could not live in this world without you, and damn the consequences. When I awoke and you were there, injured but alive, I was a changed man. Our time in the ruins before being rescued was a sort of agony in and of itself.”

“Well, you were injured; of course it was painful.”

“I meant more the visceral need to touch and comfort you, Elizabeth. It had me in a perpetual state of feelings I had not allowed

myself to indulge in prior. I knew right away that we would need to marry, and that…helped."

"Whereas I had no such realisation! I was awful to you that night even though I owed you everything. Can you ever forgive me for my reactions?"

"What will you say to me when I tell you that in my arrogance, I did not see your aversion to me as anything other than the pain of your injuries? I was blind then, in more ways than physically, though we did not even know that yet."

"I have at times revisited memories of those hours when I was in need of comfort. Although I did not like you so well as I do now, it was a frightful time, and you were warm, assured, and of great comfort to me. I believe I did not allow myself to trust in your affections because I did not believe I could be so fortunate as to have access to that security for a lifetime."

"You do, Elizabeth, whenever you wish it."

"I was restless and unsettled until you came to speak to my father. I am ashamed to admit, I did not trust you would offer for me despite realising by then the need to marry."

He started at that and pulled back to look at me. "Did Bingley not send my assurances? And in all his courting of your sister while I was forced to recover more at Netherfield! He did not tell you I would come?"

"Oh, he did, but I believe I was fighting my feelings for you even then. I was confused by the attraction I felt for you in the ruins, not to mention the comfort I felt during that horrifying experience. It all combined to work against me, especially because I believed you disliked me so soundly."

He grumbled something under his breath, but I could not make it out. Then he added, "Dislike is a far cry from what I was feeling for you, in or out of the ruins."

"How was I to guess? All you ever did was stare at me."

His brow hitched in what was an obvious expression of incredulity, and his eyes focused on me in that disapproving stare of his. I readied myself to point it out when, looking deeper into his eyes, I felt the heat of it for the first time. *Desire.* My cheeks reddened, and I felt my lips tingle.

"Oh."

Closing his eyes, he drew in a long, slow breath. "Oh, indeed."

I bit my lip, secretly pleased at this revelation, and began to search my memories for those looks before, tinting them with new understanding. Raw attraction, not disapproval. Interesting notion, that.

"And now we are at the point in the story where the blind man is

made to see—though by this time, he is literally blind.

"I went to your father after I asked you marry me, and do you know what he said to me, Elizabeth? He took me to task for the conceited idiot I was and said that despite the circumstances, had he any choice, he would not have consented. He laid before me his knowledge of your adverse sentiments towards me, and I was astonished and, sadly, arrogantly disbelieving."

"I am sorry you had to hear it. I was far too vocal and unfairly judgmental."

He gave her a gentle smile. "Do not be sorry; it was what opened my eyes. I had been unpardonably rude and assuming. I was, up to that point, gladdened to have had the accident force my hand. Even though I had learned from it that I could not live without you, I was still grateful it had taken the marriage choice away, allowing me to pursue what I had believed impossible. Until that moment with your father, I had been relieved that I no longer would need to fight this love I had developed for you. I had given little thought as to how you would feel, and was only grateful I could now claim you. I am ashamed to say, I even assumed you would feel the same happiness. See how blind I was?

"Yet, in a matter of moments, your father stripped me of everything I had believed and helped me to realise how much I valued —nay, needed—your love and affection in return, in order to truly be happy. I confessed to him my feelings for you then, and I believe that went a long way towards gaining his acceptance of the match."

"Then…" I thought back to their many interactions since our engagement. I remembered the particular way they were with each other and… "I am not a fish!"

He broke into unrestrained laughter, holding his hands up in surrender. "That was your father's analogy the first time he came to Netherfield to call with you and Miss Bennet. I was not pleased by it either, but it behoved him to ask me of my progress, and I admit, it was a way I might ask for some helpful clues from him."

"On casting the right lure and reeling in your catch. Me. How flattering."

His arms wound around me as he soothed me with his hands in my hair. "It was not well done of us, but his encouragement as time passed did allow me to hope as I had not dared hope before."

I cast him a feigned look of rebuke then could not hold back a chuckle of my own. Of course, my father—known to be an odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice—would utilise this stratagem of disguise with my intended. I was pleased Fitzwilliam had not approved of the metaphor, even as I was moved that he would seek my father's help in wooing me.

“I forgive you as long as you do not continue to liken me to a fish.”

“You have my promise, my love.”

“I do not feel worthy of you. I cannot imagine why you would desire my good opinion when all the advantage is on my side.”

“I disagree.” He once again pulled me close to him, and with a caress of his hand, placed a stirring kiss just to the side of my mouth. “I *needed* you to fall in love with me, Elizabeth”—his next kiss was better placed—“more than I ever needed my sight returned.”

Neither of us then had any sight for a time as our eyes were closed and our lips silent, as our hearts did all the speaking.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



It was inevitable that we should have to float down to earth again at some point, and it was Fitzwilliam who first suggested we leave our heavenly sanctuary. I frowned petulantly at his reason, wishing to remain in our world without care. After the tumult of emotion I had experienced over the past week, I was loath to leave the feeling of peace and security I found in my intended's arms. He was the source of so much contentment for me, and both of our bruised hearts needed the balm of the other's love, so freely given once we reached our understanding. For the first time in many weeks, we were both seeing clearly and without hindrance the future before us. And it was a glorious riot of passionate colour, vivid with love and clarity of heart.

He had pulled me to reluctantly stand, moving me with gentle chuckles towards a mirror placed along the wall. When I caught sight of myself, I gasped and turned to him with pinked cheeks and mock outrage.

"You look quite lovely to me, though I beg you to restore the pins or I shall find myself in trouble with your father."

"And well deserved it would be. Just look at this mess!" I began pulling any remaining pins out of my hair and placing them along a shelf as I determined there was no fixing it without starting over again. The movements were familiar, and I was, for a moment, caught up in the process of this daily routine. At one point my eyes joined with Fitzwilliam's in the mirror and it stopped me.

How had I ever mistaken that stare as disapproval? I was warmed all over, and I turned, wishing to enter his embrace again, his look a siren song to me. His hands stretched out to hold me back so his eyes could drink their fill of my hair, now laying in curled tassels about my shoulders.

"Elizabeth, your hair. It is magnificent."

"It is an unruly mess, and I wish I had much less of it," I said, embarrassed and blushing at his compliment.

He was shaking his head before I had even finished, his hands reaching to bury themselves in it. He lifted it to his nose and inhaled, coming away to look at me. "Never say such foolish things. Your hair is lovely and tempts me to forget I ever suggested we re-join our

families."

"I am amenable to that idea, sir."

Fitzwilliam smirked at me and shook his head. With determined shoulders, he turned me once again to the mirror and took a careful step backwards. I watched his hands clasp each other as if to prevent themselves from reaching for me again.

I began once more to separate and place my hair into an elegant coiffure, pleased and a little self-conscious by the focused way he watched my progress. When I was finished, I turned to him and asked whether it met with his approval.

He sighed, placed my hand on his arm, and led me to the door. "It does not, for now that I have seen it down, I far prefer it that way. But it will satisfy your father, I hope."

Joy, unfiltered and unhindered, allowed my limbs to move with him to re-join our families. I imagined it was the fuel that worked the muscles, filled my lungs full, and strained my cheeks with an effervescent smile to match my intended's. There was not room enough even for a single rational thought, which is why I objected again as we neared the library's exit, wishing to stay a little longer. He chuckled and lifted my hand to place a kiss. I saw he, too, wished to escape this obligation. Propriety, what a useless notion.

I much preferred passion and affection expressed with Fitzwilliam to the dull taste of society with others. My companion found this amusing, given how, between the two of us, it was usually I that sought out the society of others and not him.

Before we pushed through the door that would lead us out of our beloved library, he turned to me.

"I am risking another minute, surprised that your father has gifted me this much time with you, to ask you—nay, beg you—to pick a date for our wedding."

Distracted by his mention of my father, I asked, "Did you request to speak to me privately?"

"I did not. I was too cowardly to face you. I had determined to give you the day, hoping that the news of my eyesight's return had overset you, and to find you pleased with me again on the morrow. Your father spoke to you, and then you left the room. Shortly thereafter, he came up to me and told me where I might find you and said…"

His face gave away embarrassment and perhaps a little remorse. I lifted a brow at him, folding my arms across my body. He fumbled for words, looking worried.

"Let me venture to guess, my love. He encouraged you to bait the hook, or cast the line, or some other nonsense."

By the looks of it, I guessed accurately. I was amused and shook my head, pleased my future husband did not take pleasure in

potentially raising my ire.

With chagrin, he confessed, “He said, ‘tis time to reel her in, my boy’. However, it mattered little how he said it, I was desperate for a chance to speak to you, and with no delay took the opportunity he presented. I had not expected to find you in tears though.”

I released my arms and placed them again on his. “That is all behind us. I have no objection to any date you think right for our wedding. If you recall, it was you who had opinions on that matter before.”

“My choice would be to marry tomorrow, but I fear your mother will not think kindly on that. If we allow for the banns to be read this Sunday for the first time, that would make the earliest we could marry without a special licence to be—”

“Christmas.”

“I cannot think of a better gift than to have you as my wife, Elizabeth, but tell me truly, would you wish to marry after the holiday, a week later?”

“Or earlier? You mentioned the possibility of a special licence… No, I am teasing, though it is a tempting thought. Let us marry just after Christmas. The festive season has always been my favourite, and now I shall have more reason for it.”

He lifted my hand to his lips and thanked me with sincerity. “Two days after Christmas, then.”

I blushed, wishing to distract myself from his heated gaze, and said, “Jane will be pleased. She and I had always wanted to have a double wedding, if possible. Charles and she have been waiting for us to set a date.”

“My poor friend. I shall have to apologise for making him wait.”

“Come, Mr Darcy, although I am loath to admit where I am wrong and you are right, we really must re-join our families.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth, for the gift of your hand, your love, and for seeing me through this.”

“I love you.”

He returned the sentiment with a soft kiss upon my lips. I floated upon the sensation of it all the way to the parlour.

It did not take long for my father to notice the difference in my demeanour, and he came quickly to us. I admit, I laughed at the look upon my love’s face when my father made some humorous enquiry about fishing success. He had looked to me, caught between replying to my father and displeasing his future wife. I squeezed his arm and instead surprised my father with a gentle rebuke. He laughed to learn I was informed of their disguised code of communication.

“Mr Darcy has caught me in his net, Papa. And your days of teasing are over in that quarter.”

We soon communicated our wish to marry at Christmas, and once Charles and Jane were summoned to our small party in the corner of the room and informed, it took little effort to get their eager approval of the plan. Therefore, it was the work of but a moment to announce it to the rest of our relations. The remainder of our visit was spent accepting heartfelt congratulations and well wishes.

Whenever I looked upon my future husband, I was stunned by his handsome, noble features, but it was his hesitant, shy attempts to assuage my mother's concerns about how fresh flowers might be had in winter that filled my breast to overflowing with love.

"At Pemberley, we often decorate with pine boughs and berries at this time of year. I think it a festive alternative, and I am certain your admirable talent in this area would make it elegant."

Georgiana distracted me then with her warm embrace. She had always been pleased at the idea of me as her sister, and even though Fitzwilliam and I had already been engaged a month, it seemed that selecting a date had made the young girl sentimental with the anticipated reality of it.

"I might remind you, dearest Georgiana, you are gaining five sisters. I hope that prospect does not diminish the joy you feel in the one you expected."

The realisation given with my words filled her eyes with pleasure, and she embraced me with a quick hug, withdrawing after a little while with shy embarrassment at her impetuous action. I pulled her again into my arms, whispering into her ear that she would have no rebuke from me, for we were a demonstrative lot of sisters.

Over her shoulder, I caught the eye of Colonel Fitzwilliam, and rolled my eyes at his smirk. He joined us and lifted my hand to bow over.

"Elizabeth, I am as pleased for my cousin as I am for you."

Georgiana excused herself and tentatively began a conversation with Mary. I smiled at her efforts to know her other new sisters better and turned a raised brow to my new cousin.

"I am certain you are not the sort of gentleman to gloat when he is proven correct, and so I have no fear in telling you that I was wrong. When we first met, you claimed I was mistaken in my estimation of your cousin's admiration for me. I did not believe you when you said Fitzwilliam found me tempting, but to my luck and pleasure, I find he does."

"On the contrary. I am very much that type of gentleman and shall gloat tremendously—and for far longer than you will have patience for."

I laughed, shaking my head at the ridiculous man. When we both quieted our amusement, I looked at him and a surge of familial

tenderness swelled within me. From the beginning, I had been disconcerted by the strange way Colonel Fitzwilliam was able to read me and wished to discredit the brotherly connexion I felt for him. He was irritating, disquieting, challenging, and loyal. Just as I had always hoped a brother might be, had I ever been blessed with one.

"You have been patient with me as I learned to see him with clear eyes, and although I think at times that I deserved a firm shaking for my stubbornness, you remained kind. I thank you for that."

I sensed he was pleased with my compliment, though a little uncomfortable with the emotion it engendered.

With a gruffness in his tone, he replied, "Darcy, although only my cousin, is nearer a sibling to me than my own rapscallion relations. I hope you will always know that you have my affection as a dear sister."

"I imagine I have little choice but to accept such a gift as I have no brother of my own. At least until Jane marries."

"I shall not tell Bingley I am your favourite, then."

I laughed again, gently pushing his arm. My laughter drew my intended to us, and he frowned at the ease between his cousin and me. It did not take me long to see a little jealousy in his eyes, and I wished to ease his concerns. Our love was so newly realised, it was easy to feel a little insecure in it.

"Your cousin was just telling me that he plans to be an annoying brother to me rather than a well-behaved cousin. And I was just letting him know it was not possible for him to be more irritating than he already was."

As expected, the two gentlemen laughed uninhibitedly. My betrothed secured my hand at his arm, squeezing it to tell me he appreciated my reassurance.

"I believe you will find Elizabeth far too clever for you, Cousin."

"Perhaps you are right, but I shall have great pleasure in testing that theory," the colonel replied without skipping a beat. "Maybe now, Elizabeth, you might consent to call me Richard."

I had no more reservations for such a request. He had been calling me by my Christian name without permission since the onset of our acquaintance, yet I had not returned that familiarity. It was a concession I had not been ready to make before feeling comfortable calling my intended by his given name, and shortly thereafter, I had suspected the colonel of grievous intentions and could not allow it. I now realised that it would be more bothersome to him if I did not, and I decided then to never call him by his given name, at least to his face.

"I could not possibly, Colonel!" I cried, in feigned horror.

He saw through my act and simply shook his head, amused at me.

“She may be far too clever for even you, Darcy. I fear you she will lead you on a merry chase.”

“And I shall enjoy catching her,” Fitzwilliam replied, with a raised brow.

I bit my lip, a fruitless attempt to keep my composure, and ended up bubbling up with laughter at my betrothed’s audacious reference to the loathed fishing metaphor. My delight was compounded by the colonel’s confused expression.

I released his arm, looking coquettishly at my future husband, and said, before walking away, “You are mistaken, sir, in believing it is me who is caught. Perhaps it is you who is on the line.”

I heard Fitzwilliam’s baritone laugh and looked over my shoulder in time to see him pat his muddled cousin on the shoulder in farewell, then walk after me, mumbling about being well and truly caught.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



"I wish to go to Bodden Chapel."

There was a moment of pregnant pause, as my companions had their teacups lifted to their mouths—and then an eruption of protests.

"Lizzy, no!"

"Absolutely not, Elizabeth!"

Jane and Fitzwilliam had voiced their opinions, ones I had fully expected from those quarters. I looked to the fourth in our party, and Charles was silent on the matter. His eyes fixed on mine, and although he did not protest, there was hesitation and, gratefully, a little bit of understanding in his expression.

"I must insist, my dear, that it is much too dangerous," my intended repeated, with more calm in his voice this time.

I turned to him and, pressing his hand, smiled plaintively at him. "In less than one week's time, I shall leave off the name Bennet, taking up your own fine surname. I shall leave this county to become a resident of Derbyshire. There is so much change in those two statements. I understand your hesitation with regard to Bodden Chapel. It is the place that owns countless emotions for the four of us."

"Then why would you wish to revisit something so unpleasant?"

"Before the accident, I was enjoying listening to the history of the place. Yes, despite our historian being Mr Collins with his pompous manner of speaking. Walking those grounds, I could imagine the people who once worshipped there. Fitzwilliam, we became part of that history when the collapse occurred, whether you want to acknowledge it or not. Our very union in a few days is part of that history. Any resultant children are part of the history of those rocks too. I would rather not let the demons of the past colour our future."

"Lizzy, it was a very trying few days for all of us," Jane's gentle voice replied.

I was looking at my betrothed, and I saw in his eyes a swirl of emotion that I felt drawn to. It pulled me closer to him, where my voice was softer and less demanding, though no less persistent.

"My dear, the accident brought us together. Bodden Chapel ruins loom large, terrifying, and awful in my mind, while memories of our

hours entombed there hold much different emotions now. I wish to see the place that changed so much of my heart and future. I think in doing so, I shall be able to erase the horrors and think only of the past as it gives me pleasure."

"You are a very difficult person to say no to, Elizabeth. Are you certain I cannot persuade you against this scheme?" I could tell by the tone of his voice that I had won my case. Still, it would not hurt to tease him a little. I had found in the course of the past few weeks, since we had reached an understanding of the heart, that my intended was very susceptible to my teasing.

"You need not come if you dislike the idea so much. Until such a time as our wedding vows are spoken, I have no obligation to 'obey'. And thereafter, I promise to try very hard to fulfil that vow. I cannot say whether I shall always succeed, but I shall promise to try."

His lips twitched, and I saw immediately the desire to kiss the impertinence off my lips, though being in company prevented him.

"I shall accompany you, Elizabeth," Charles spoke up, drawing three sets of eyes to him. "I am sorry, my love," he said to Jane, "if this does not meet with your approval; however, I think for our dear sister, a closure of sorts will be good. When I was very young, one of my grandfather's mills caught fire. He was part of the rescue force. Although no lives were lost, it was too much for him to continue with the site and he sold it off. I think if he had been able to return and see that it was not some great monster, but merely a sodden, charred building, he might have felt less averse to it. In any case, I am certain I can keep Elizabeth safely away from any unstable portions."

"Thank you, Charles," I said with feeling.

"Lizzy, I cannot like this at all, and I think you know that. However, I shall come too, for I dislike more the idea of you going without me."

I turned then to my intended for his decision. My sister and Charles had agreed to accompany me, and that would be enough, but inside, I wished with all my heart that he might be there beside me when I first encountered that place again. Even though I displayed a brave front, the thought of returning did bring a goodly measure of trepidation.

"I shall come with you, my love. But not because I feel Bingley is as incapable of saying no to you as I am. Between the two of us, we might keep you from venturing where it may not be safe. No, I wish to accompany you because I recognise the correctness in your reasoning. It is part of our history. I should like to take the parts that bring me joy with us and leave behind the harrowing memories."

Despite the others being near, I took up his hand in mine and held it. "Let us close this chapter together." Turning to my sister, I thanked

her too. I knew that she was far less serene about the decision than she showed and I would need to reassure her later that I was not being foolhardy.

Together the men discussed a possible day, and it was determined that two days hence, we would all travel in Fitzwilliam's carriage to Bodden Chapel. I felt a surge of anticipation fill my breast. It was a mixture of elation, fear, and nerves. I had come to the conclusion the night before, after many such nights of contemplation, that a return to the ruins was necessary. We were now part of the history of that insignificant little structure. When later adventurers walked those grounds, they would never know our part in the history, but I hoped that when Fitzwilliam and I looked back at the beginning—at the onset of where our lives collided with rock and earth—we would be able to remember the tender embraces, the shared warmth, and those hours where both of our visions were changed.

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When the carriage wheels slowed to a stop at the base of the great hill leading to the ruins, all the bravado seeped out of me and into the velvet squabs beneath. The hot bricks at my feet no longer penetrated my boots pleasantly, for my limbs all felt cold. I thought immediately that I had made a grave error in suggesting such a foolish idea. All it took was to look at the slope where the rocks of the chapel walls were not even fully visible, and I was petrified.

Jane and Charles had already descended the carriage, unaware of my cowardice. Fitzwilliam, ever attuned to me, had little trouble seeing the distress I was in. He immediately changed sides to sit beside me, drawing me into his embrace. The carriage was dark enough, and his arms familiar enough that, combined with the surge of remembered terror running through my veins, I might have said I was once again inside those ruins with him. I shivered at the thought and buried my face into his cravat.

"You are trembling, my love."

I could not speak. The walls of the carriage were pressing into us as the earth and rocks had before. My lungs felt restricted but without the stabbing pain they had endured after the collapse. It was that distinction that barely held my sanity in place. We were not trapped in those ruins again, though my heart beat as if we were.

In the next moment, all thoughts of fear and phantom imprisonment fled my mind as the brightness and warmth that accompanied Fitzwilliam's kisses slowly filtered into the terror and erased all the darkness. He kissed me passionately, deeper than he had yet done, and my world burst in love and happiness. When he ended

the kiss, breathless though we both were, it was his face that I focused on. My eyes were glued to his, marvelling at the tenderness within. He saw me, knew that I had been at the point of danger yet again, and rescued me once more.

"How did you know?"

"Elizabeth, my love, today is a day of new memories. As you said, this place holds significant history for us. We were united here in more ways than matrimonial obligation. My heart gained its sight here and saw yours. I knew that you were becoming lost to the dark unpleasantness of the past, and I thought, maybe if we created new memories, it might bring you back into the light."

I quirked my brow at his choice for a making a new memory. But his words rang true, and I was comforted by the communion of our hearts forged here, in this once holy place of worship.

"Do you wish to return to Longbourn, or do you still want to see the ruins?"

I was not certain I was capable of the inner strength it would take alone, but with Fitzwilliam's presence, I was sure the trial would be bearable.

"As long as I have you beside me, I should like to continue."

"Always, my love."

He descended the carriage, and I took the opportunity to press my hands to my cheeks and draw a bracing breath. My gloves came away slightly damp, and I took the handkerchief from my reticule to dry my tears. My intended's hand reached into the carriage for me, and that was all I needed to proceed out of it.

Jane and Charles were some steps away, heads together and speaking through their own thoughts on the return to this place. It occurred to me that Jane had not returned since the collapse, though Charles had when the rescue party came.

At our own paces, we four began our ascent up the steep hill. Fitzwilliam kept his attention on me, ensuring my continued comfort, and on the ground before us to make certain we stepped carefully over the ruts and rocks of the path. It was not until we neared the top of the hill that he looked up at hearing the gasp from my lips.

He grew very still then, and we both allowed our eyes to capture the entirety of the ruins before us. When we were rescued, I had spent too little time examining the extent of the collapse. I was far too focused on the pain in my chest, the strange longing I felt for Fitzwilliam, and the incoherency of my thoughts as I sat in disbelief that we had been rescued. And my betrothed had emerged from those ruins without the use of his sight. For Fitzwilliam, this was the first he would see the place where we had been trapped.

Silence hung heavy around us; even the birds in the trees seemed

to understand the need for quiet. The rock walls had fallen in large slabs, now littered with fallen leaves and covered in places with frost where the sun had not yet warmed them enough to melt it.

Before long, I realised it was just as Charles had said: it was simply a pile of rocks, not this great monster with its mouth wide open ready to swallow us again. I watched as Fitzwilliam slowly walked closer to it, his eyes locked on what remained of the structure. Whether he was seeing what was before him or looking through eyes of memories past, I did not know.

I followed closely behind him and took his hand. At the contact, he looked down at it, at first puzzled, and then at me. He was returned from that place he had gone, for his eyes warmed and he pulled my hand to his lips.

"It is not at all what I had imagined, and yet, exactly so." He shook his head. "I know I am not making sense."

"I understand you."

He returned his gaze to the ruins nearby and then back at me. "It is difficult to be standing here and not recall those last moments before the landslide. I spent weeks with that image in my mind of your imminent danger taunting me. I feared in coming, I would experience it all again. In a way, I have, yet your hand is warm and you are safely beside me."

"I remember the ferocity of your gaze before you jumped towards me. It was compelling and mesmerising. I had no ability to be aware of anything else around me. That steadfastness of focus has forever been ingrained in my mind as the purest expression of your love. You love me with a force I cannot help but be drawn into."

"Thank you for suggesting we return here. It *is* part of our history. It is the moment when all my life came into focus, and I knew that my heart would not beat for anyone else."

I pulled his arm close to my side, and together we stood there looking at the ruins before us. I could see the small opening Charles and the others had created that allowed us to climb out of the rocks. I felt no compulsion to venture closer or to look inside. The horrors of that day were slowly draining out of me, down the hill and away from this place.

Fitzwilliam bent and collected a couple of the small fragments of rocks at our feet. His palm opened to them, and they jostled against the rich leather of his glove. The weak winter sun dappled across his palm, and a few of the rocks glistened from the dampness and the veins of quartz that lined through them.

We spoke softly of our memories of those critical hours and of our affection grown from the same. After a few minutes, I was ready to return to the carriage and indicated so. We saw that Charles and Jane

were already carefully making their way down the hill, and Fitzwilliam guided us to follow.

The return trip to Longbourn was filled with pleasant conversation, laughter, and good feeling. Charles, innocently pleased beyond expectation, did speak of the third union forged from the trip to Bodden Chapel. When he wrote to his sister of the proposed wedding date, she sent her regrets, saying they would not be able to leave the parish to attend. Being concerned, Charles made a quick trip to Kent to visit his sister and determine her comfort as the new Mrs Collins. It was amusing to Fitzwilliam and me when Charles then blushed scarlet, scratching the back of his neck as he affirmed that from what he had inadvertently witnessed, his sister and her husband were quite happy. However, his sister had expressed during his visit that she hoped Fitzwilliam would soon have a different preferment for her husband.

Apart from initial comments of our differing impressions of revisiting Bodden Chapel, it was not necessary that we dwell on the topic. All had experienced a release of sorts with our visit, and we were free to forge new memories. I expected that the rest of our lives together would bring many such moments of pleasant conversation.

~

With the looming memory of the events at Bodden Chapel no longer a shadow in my mind, I was free to fully experience the joy of the last days before our wedding. I had even discovered a gift for Fitzwilliam, which pleased me immensely. Previous to now, I had felt a mental hindrance of sorts that prevented me from finding just what I wished to gift him for the holiday.

A dinner was held at Netherfield Park both to honour the brides, and the shared celebration of Christmas Eve only added to the wonder of the evening. I looked around at the gathered members of our collective families and felt all the blessings of the season. All were beloved to me, and all were made merry with spiced punch, candied fruit cake, and the pine-perfumed air.

Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam joined us where we stood near the warm fire of the yule log. The sparkle in their eyes was at first suspicious, for I had learned never to trust that look in the colonel's face. It often precluded some joke of sorts.

"Have you exchanged gifts?"

I looked to Fitzwilliam and blushed, a little nervous now to give him mine. "We have not yet, Georgiana. But I have yours right here."

I reached behind me to a nearby small table and passed her a paper-wrapped package. She was delighted with the novel I had

chosen for her, it being the second volume for the one I had loaned her some weeks ago.

"Georgie and I have a gift for you both, but you must follow us to see it," Colonel Fitzwilliam said with a smirk.

I looked to Georgiana and saw that she was blushing, but not unhappily. My intended took my arm and gestured to his cousin to lead the way. We walked only to the empty hall, our guides turning around with bright smiles on their faces. I expected they wished for a bit of privacy to give us our gift and was prepared to be amused given the glint once again in their eyes.

"Here we are, cousins. Georgiana made it, but you must blame only me. It was my idea. I figured you ought to have privacy for your first."

I looked to my betrothed for understanding only to find his face bathed with the same confusion as mine. Georgiana giggled, her head bowed to hide her blushes, and Colonel Fitzwilliam led her around us, leaving us to stand in the middle of the deserted hall.

"For heaven's sake, Darcy, look up! And do not waste this moment. Georgiana and I shall only guard the door for a few minutes."

Following his instructions, we both looked up to find a kissing bough that had not been there earlier. I began to laugh, shaking my head at the romantic mischief-makers.

Fitzwilliam chuckled as well, though he called out to his cousin before they could disappear through the threshold and into the parlour once again.

"I thank you, Richard, though whatever makes you think this is our first kiss is beyond me."

The look of surprise that stopped my new cousin in his tracks was gift enough for me, and I lost myself to mirth once again. My merriment was little helped by how Georgiana was required to recall the colonel from his stupor by pulling him along towards the door.

Fitzwilliam drew my attention to him as he lifted my chin. With laughter still in his eyes, and his smile wide enough to show his dimple, I had never felt he was more handsome than at that moment.

"A fine gift, I must say. I have been tortured by the mulled wine staining your lips all evening."

His words sobered the humour right out of me, and I lifted up on the tips of my slippers to meet him halfway for a kiss. When the kiss ended and I was flat-footed again, I reached into my pocket to withdraw a small ribbon-bound handkerchief.

"A fine gift, indeed. And now, I hope you will be pleased by mine too."

"Elizabeth, you need not have gotten me anything."

"And you will tell me you did not select a gift for me? You have

been very mysterious lately."

"I have a gift for you, but you did not need to give me anything. Receiving your hand will be gift enough."

"Well, it is too late for such a pretty speech; the gift is in your hands. Open it."

I bit my lip, nervous to please him. Instinctively, my hand reached to the nape of my neck, only to remember.

He carefully untied the ribbon, allowing the white linen handkerchief with his initials embroidered on it to fall open. Inside was the chocolate spiral lock he so favoured.

"This is not—" He stopped abruptly, folded the lock again in the cloth, and spun me around by the shoulders to see what I had done. The errant curl that ever escaped my coiffure had been trimmed short, and my gift was indeed that piece of my hair he was always so tantalisingly drawn to.

"What have you done, my love!"

I could not at first tell whether he was displeased, though I thought he might be a little disappointed to see its shortened length. Before I could reply, I was spun around again, pressed up against his chest, and his lips descended once more to capture mine. So he was not displeased, it would seem.

I was breathless when he finally withdrew to inspect again the short wisps at my neck, comparing it to the lock in his hands.

"It is a crime to cut this hair of yours, yet I cannot be otherwise than profoundly touched by your gift. I fear I am caught between love for your sweet thought and disappointment that this little curl is no longer there for my pleasure. And how is it that I had not noticed this evening?"

"It will grow back. I often have to trim it, for no matter how long it gets, I can never get it to behave and join the others when I put my hair up."

"Then I shall treasure this and wait for my little friend to grow long again. Thank you, Elizabeth."

"My pleasure."

Fitzwilliam soon placed a small parcel in my hands, though his large fingers prevented me from opening it.

"I hope you will be pleased with my gift. It is not…well, it is not the usual…"

"I am certain I shall love it. Might I be free to open it then?"

He nodded, and I carefully untied the string holding the paper around the small box. However, what I discovered inside was not what I expected when I saw the stamp of our jeweller in Meryton. I lifted the delicate chain up to see the necklace better in the candlelight. At the end of the chain was a pendant where a diamond

might have once been. In its place, was a polished though rough-cut pebble that I recognised immediately. It was one of the small stones Fitzwilliam had picked up from the ground around Bodden Chapel. The vein of ivory quartz glistened in the low light of the hall. It far exceeded any precious stone that might have otherwise been placed in its space, and I could not express words to tell him how lovely it looked to me. I attempted to, lifting my eyes to my intended, but the sentiment was lost on my lips.

"Bodden Chapel is part of our history as you so rightly taught me, and I wanted you to have a piece of it with you always. It may not be the height of fashion, but it will mean something to the two of us. We shall be married in another house of God, but I hoped you would consent to wear this necklace in homage to the first chapel that united us."

Blinking back tears at his words, I nodded before I could gather the ability to speak. "I think it only right that I do. Thank you, love, it is most beautiful. And I imagine Mr Murphey worked many hours to accomplish such a commission so quickly."

"I fear he thinks I am a most peculiar man to ask him to replace the diamond in this set with a rock of no value."

"It is invaluable to me. Will you help me with the clasp?"

I turned so he might place the necklace about my neck, but my breath caught at the feel of his lips pressing there instead. With a low groan, he murmured, "I shall miss this curl."

The kiss, combined with the gentle touch of his fingers at my nape as he secured the clasp of the necklace, sent currents down my spine.

"Thank you for seeing me through the darkness, Elizabeth."

"My eyes were just as blinded, as we both know. I love you."

"You are my heart." He began leading me back to the company of our relations when he stopped abruptly and laughed heartedly. At my questioning glance, he shook his head and said, "I suppose our love was a case of the blind leading the blind?"

It was so ridiculous that I could not help but laugh at it. The wry, sometimes preposterous humour my intended employed was a delight to discover. I was fortunate that I was allowed the opportunity to learn this and other beloved aspects of his character. I had always hoped to marry for love, and as I looked up at the dark handsome features of this man, I intended to do just that.

With reverence, I touched the stone that rested near my heart, sending a prayer of gratitude heavenward for the persistent rains that turned the world upside down, sending a forgotten chapel to its knees.

Epilogue



I awoke from the dream with a gasp, my heart beating out of my chest in that unnatural manner one experiences after a night terror. It was startling to go from restful to alert so swiftly, and my chest felt as if I could not accommodate the wishes of that beating organ with enough oxygen to sate it. Instinctively, I reached for the warmth beside me, and my mind began to see reason.

Although the events at Bodden Chapel had long since lost their usual strength to distress me, I was still occasionally plagued with their phantom arms reaching into my dreams. In the unreality of a dream state, none of the healing sentiments that had long replaced the terror could help my disillusioned mind to remember all was well. Only in waking was I able to escape those moments.

Strong arms pulled me closer, and a sleepy voice crooned in my ear.

"Be at peace, Elizabeth. I am here."

Lips, warm and caressing, punctuated his tired words with presses to my fevered temple. I ran my hand along the contours of his arms, marvelling at the masculine dips and curves. The first time these arms surrounded me once again faded into a pleasant memory while the remnants of the dream, distorted and ugly, drifted away.

We had been married a month complete, and I had never tired of the feeling of security and peace in my husband's arms. I felt him settle against me, his breath against my neck. He was likely already halfway under Morpheus's spell, though I could not, and would likely not be able to be for some time.

Absently, I ran my fingers along the length of his arm and through his tousled curls as I allowed my wakeful mind to marvel at my good fortune. It was full dark, and even though I could see nothing, I felt safe despite the night terror that had woken me. In the course of my short marriage, I had learned that my husband was a sweetly sentimental man.

The necklace he gifted me upon our marriage, and that never left my person, was just one such example. I thought back, with a smile in the dark, to the time I found a small yet familiar red leaf pressed in the pages of the book he kept by our bed. It had dried to a deep

crimson, rich in its hue. I had asked him about it then, incredulous to see he had preserved the leaf I had given him on that first visit to Netherfield after the accident. I remembered the urgency with which I had rescued that pile of leaves, and thought how silly it was that I had attributed any living emotion to them. Upon my return to Longbourn, I had discarded the rest of the lot and forgotten that Fitzwilliam had requested one.

"It was the first gift you gave me after the gift of your hand. There was something in your voice that day that puzzled me, and since I had not the courage to ask you about it, I settled for asking for one of your treasures."

I continued to think on the various other proofs of his sentimentality, now in daily evidence as we proceeded through the newness of married life. My husband often wrote me notes, hiding them in unexpected places for me to find. They were only a short line or two expressing his love, but I relished the discovery of each, and always warmed to see my name written in his distinctive handwriting. Jane may have received her share of missives during her engagement, but I now had nothing to pine over.

I was lost in contemplation and did not at first notice the change in the rhythm of my husband's breathing. But I became quickly aware of the hitch of my own when I felt the gentle press of his lips to the hollow at my neck where the stone on my necklace sat tucked against my skin.

My hands stilled in their absent journeying to give the proper attention to the sensations elsewhere.

"If you will not sleep, my love, then I might have another suggestion to pass the time until day."

A slow smile grew at my lips, though I proceeded to act as though I did not understand his meaning. He was not fooled and pinched lightly at my side, making me squirm and laugh quietly. All the while, he pressed gentle kisses along the length of my neck towards my ear. I held my breath to see whether he would neglect the spot behind it that I favoured most.

I sighed and melted into the soft pad of the mattress, for he had not neglected it in any way, rather giving it the utmost attention.

"It is perhaps a good thing you did not wake me this way at Bodden Chapel," I teased, the fragments of the dream drawing similarities to our position now and those we used back then. The dark shrouded us, and the heavy cover pane created a tomb of sorts just the size of our bodies.

Fitzwilliam lifted up on his elbows, presumably to look down at me, though given the blackness of the night, I could not see his expression and was sure he was equally blind to mine.

“I imagine you may not have been so receptive then as you are now.”

I laughed, picturing how I might have reacted had he kissed me like this.

“Though I cannot say the thought did not cross my mind. It was difficult to resist.”

“I do not believe you. You were knocked senseless!”

“Elizabeth, you are quite mistaken. Senseless or not, I had by that time long wished to kiss you.”

When he said such things, even after the knowledge of his feelings for me, they still had the power to surprise me. I always marvelled at how blind I had been to his true feelings all those months. Both during the majority of our engagement and, it would seem, the months before.

“The thought of kissing you *had* crossed my mind at one point while we were trapped in the rubble,” I confessed.

“When?”

The eagerness in his voice made me smile into the darkness.

“When I watched you take my father’s flask to your lips.”

He groaned then and lowered once again to resume his earlier pleasant attentions. I was mistaken earlier when I had woken from the dream. *That* ugliness ought not to be called a dream. It had none of the magic of this—this reality was more dream than those contorted imaginings of my sleep-filled mind.

“Your memories of that time astound me. I wonder whether you ever told Jane you believed it was she who was sleeping beside you at one point in the night.”

I froze, embarrassment flushing through me at the memory. I had always hoped he was too senseless to remember. I, however, remembered all too clearly snuggling up to him, thinking he was my sister.

“That is not fair, sir. You have never revealed that you recall that mistake.”

“It is one of my cherished memories. I pity poor Bingley if Jane is the blanket stealer you accused her of being that night.”

I laughed, half-heartedly pushing at him. “I wish you *had* been senseless to my sleep-driven actions.”

“It was pure torture and bliss beyond compare. Shall I show you how senseless I really was rendered at the feel of you next to me in those ruins?”

The seductive murmur of his words as he ran his hands through the locks of my hair, settled low in my stomach. The delicious spread of warmth that filled me from head to toe thrummed in my veins. I succumbed willingly to his ministrations, allowing my hands to curve

against his strong jaw as I lifted up to kiss him.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, my protector, my husband, my greatest love, then proceeded to prove that some things did not need the benefit of sight.

The author and publisher wish to thank you for reading this book. The favor of your review would be greatly appreciated.

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Acknowledgments

One day when my home girl Jane Austen and I sit down to tea on the grassy knolls of heaven, I hope she will think I paid proper homage to her unparalleled talent and incomparable wit. Therefore, it is only proper that my first thanks be to her for writing stories that inspire the heart, for creating characters I wish would live past the pages upon which they originated, and for, frankly, being such a cool lady.

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About the Author

KaraLynne Mackrory began writing horrible poetry as an angst-filled youth. It was a means to express the exhilaration and devastation she felt every time her adolescent heart was newly in love with “the one” and then broken every other week. As her frontal lobe developed, she grew more discerning of both men and writing. She has been married to her own dreamboat of a best friend, Andrew, almost 20 years. Together they have the migraine-inducing responsibility of raising five children to not be dirt bags (fingers crossed), pick of up their socks (still a work in progress), not fight with each other (impossible task) and become generally good people (there’s hope). She loves escaping into a book, her feather babies (the regal hens of Cluckingham Palace), and laughter.

She has written five books, a novella and participated in many anthologies. Her works include: *Falling For Mr. Darcy; Bluebells in the Mourning*; *Haunting Mr. Darcy: A Spirited Courtship*; *Yours Forevermore, Darcy*; *BeSwitched*; *The Darcy Monologues*; *Rational Creatures*; & *Sun-Kissed: Effusions of Summer*.



Also by KaraLynne Mackrory

Falling for Mr Darcy

The simple truth is proven that sometimes a gentleman never knows his heart until a lady comes along to introduce it to him. When Mr Darcy encounters Elizabeth Bennet injured after a fall, his concern for her welfare cracks the shell of his carefully guarded heart, and a charming man emerges. Elizabeth sees an appealing side of him she never believed possible from the stoic, proud master of Pemberley. They find the simple gentlemanly act of assisting her home will test both Mr Darcy's resolve to keep his heart safe and Elizabeth's conviction that this is the last man on earth she might have ever been prevailed upon to marry. Soon, falling for Mr Darcy becomes a real possibility.

Haunting Mr Darcy - A Spirited Courtship

2015 IPPY Bronze Medal Winner in Romance

What happens to the happily ever after when the ever after has already happened? A "spirited" courtship indeed! Jane Austen's much adored *Pride & Prejudice* is transfigured in this Regency adaptation. That fickle friend Fate intervenes when an unexpected event threatens the happily ever after of literature's favorite love story.

The gentlemen from Netherfield have left, winter is upon the land, and after a horrifying carriage accident, Elizabeth Bennet finds her spirit transported as if by magic into Mr Darcy's London home. Paranormally tethered to the disagreeable man, it doesn't help that he believes she is a phantasm of his love-struck mind and not the real Elizabeth. Somehow they must learn to trust, learn to love and learn to bring Elizabeth back to her earthly form before it is too late.

Bluebells in the Mourning

Jane Austen's beloved *Pride & Prejudice* is readapted in this regency tale of love in the face of tragedy. Mr Darcy is thwarted in his attempt to propose to Elizabeth Bennet at Hunsford when he encounters her minutes after she receives the sad news from Longbourn of her sister's death. His gallantry and compassion as he escorts her back to Hertfordshire begins to unravel the many threads of her discontent with him. While her family heals from their loss, Darcy must search London for answers – answers that might bring justice, but might also just mark the end of his own hopes with Elizabeth. Is it true that nothing can be lost that love cannot find?

Yours Forevermore, Darcy

Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy has a secret. The letter he presented to Miss Elizabeth Bennet after his ghastly proposal is not the only epistle he has written her. In this tale of longing, misadventure and love, Jane Austen's dearly loved *Pride & Prejudice* is readapted as our hero has learned a powerful way of coping with his attraction to Miss Bennet. He writes her letters. The misguided suitor has declared himself, and Elizabeth Bennet has refused him, most painfully. Without ever intending for these letters to become known to any soul, Mr Darcy relies on his secret for coping once again. However, these letters, should they land in the wrong hands, could amount to

untold scandal, embarrassment and possibly heartbreak. But what would happen should they fall into the right hands?

BeSwitched

A Magical Pride & Prejudice Short Story

Mortals can be such pesky beings. They are always mucking up their destinies, unbalancing their fates…leaving the world of fairies to pick up the pieces and put it all to rights. Trouble is, mortals do not get a say in their fates—that's not for them to decide. Especially with regards to love, since love is such an integral part of the tapestry of mortal lives.

And everyone knows that love does not just happen. It requires a bit of finesse, a touch of magic. But how is a sprite to work that magic when stubborn mortals Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet keep fighting against their destinies? Well, a sprite will do whatever he must! Even if it means forcing the pair to see the world through the other's eyes.

This *Pride & Prejudice* retelling is a misadventure of whimsical hilarity as the world of fairies and a few troublesome mortals attempt to weave together fate and love.